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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

“Imagine that you could travel back to any period in history. What moment or event would you want to observe? What people would you want to meet? What would you ask them?”

Many of us have asked and been asked these hypothetical questions. They are designed to inspire curiosity, drive thinking, and spark the imagination. They represent, to some extent, a considerable component of what historians try to do—to use the tools at hand, books, documents, records, artifacts, testimonies, and more to explore the past, and for some perhaps to create a virtual time machine through which they can re-create that past. Teachers of history take their students on the journey of discovering, recovering, and understanding that past, teaching them the tools and skills necessary to navigate through the gaps of time, space, and culture.



But what if those hypothetical questions were phrased differently? For example: “Imagine that you could travel back to any period in history. What event would you want to experience? How do you think that event would have impacted on you? What aspect of that experience would you passionately tell your children?” These are not questions for historians, rather, they are questions for educators—whether by profession, by personal commitment, or by parentage—passing on a value system, even an identity, deeply embedded in the past. As Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes: “Memory is the past as present, as it lives on in me. Without memory there can be no identity.” The “memory creator” wants to understand how the events of the past impact the present and the future. Like teaching history, this discipline also requires tools and skills, but they are different from the tools of the historian.

These questions take on an entirely different urgency when we think about them in relation to Jewish History. As a mission-driven people which for more than 2,000 years has been a minority, often struggling to survive and maintain its identity, we run great risk if what we learn and teach remains a purely intellectual pursuit, a curiosity. We take an equally great risk if our exploration of history becomes so mission driven that it stifles student curiosity and the capacity for students to connect through multiple, alternative, and parallel pathways.

Navigating the tension between teaching history and creating memory, between academic study and the building of identity, drives many of our programs—such as the [Creating Memory workshops](#) and the [Jewish History bootcamps](#)—as we understand that Jewish History needs to include a delicate balance of both. Finding this balance is one of the key tasks of Jewish History teachers and their schools and is one of the core questions we seek to address in this issue of the journal. Read carefully and you will discover that many of the articles either allude to this implicitly or discuss it explicitly.

There are other questions which drive the thinking about teaching Jewish History. For example, should it be taught as its own distinct discipline, should it be taught in the context of general History, or should it perhaps be completely integrated into a study of general History. What do we gain when we integrate Jewish History and general History, and what do we lose by doing that?

These questions have considerable implications. For example, how much of the educational program should be devoted to Jewish History. If Jewish History is about creating memory or forging identity, should that warrant a greater concentration of time than it is currently allotted in most schools? How about the question of academic honesty; how should we handle information which conflicts with the memory narrative we are trying to tell, assuming that is one of our goals?

In a sense, the debate about Jewish History is a microcosm of the greater discussion about Jewish education. Is the goal to have Jewish adults with the knowledge and skills to engage with Jewish texts and be part of a 3,000 year-long dialogue, or is the goal to have Jewish adults who are passionate about being Jewish and committed to living Jewish lives? It is this tension which animates us at Lookstein, and which we hope drive discussions in and around Jewish education.

The articles in this journal represent a diverse range of opinions and include the thoughts of academics, theologians, thought leaders, educational entrepreneurs, and many classroom practitioners. They include deep thinking about the big issues and practical suggestions and examples currently used in a variety of educational settings. It is our hope that this journal generates core discussions for classroom teachers and educational leaders about the why, the how, and the how much of teaching Jewish History—a discussion which could have repercussions for how we see the entire enterprise of Jewish schooling. Our students, and our schools, will be better off for it.

Bivrakha,
Rabbi Zvi Grumet, Ed.D.

JEWISH HISTORY SYMPOSIUM

WITH: ADAM FERZIGER, PETER GEFFEN, YITZ GREENBERG, MARC SHAPIRO, & BEREL WEIN

For this issue of the journal, we asked five thinkers, scholars, and doers who are familiar with the Jewish day school world from the inside to reflect on core questions facing those who teach and design the place of Jewish History in the classroom. We were fascinated by both the overlap and the remarkable diversity of ideas expressed. Their responses are presented here in alphabetical order of their last names: Professor Adam Ferziger, Peter Geffen, Rabbi Dr. Yitzchak Greenberg, Professor Marc Shapiro, Rabbi Berel Wein.

Irving (Yitz) Greenberg serves as the President of the J.J. Greenberg Institute for the Advancement of Jewish Life and as Senior Scholar in Residence at Hadar (NY). Rabbi Dr. Greenberg was ordained by Beth Joseph Rabbinical Seminary (NY) and has a PhD in History from Harvard University. He served as a congregational Rabbi and a Professor of History and Jewish Studies. Together with Elie Wiesel, he founded CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and served as its president until 1997, after which he served as Founding President of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation. Rabbi Greenberg was Executive Director of the President's Commission on the Holocaust and was Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Washington, DC). He is the author of four books.



Berel Wein began his career as a lawyer and later became a pulpit Rabbi, holding positions in Miami Beach (FL), Suffern (NY), and Jerusalem. He founded Yeshiva Sha`arei Torah in Monsey (NY). Rabbi Wein is a popular lecturer in Jewish history, appearing in a variety of venues including television and radio, and has published eight books on Jewish history. He is Founder and Director of the Destiny Foundation, which is translating Rabbi Wein's accounts of Jewish history into a series of films on Jewish personalities as well as preparing a documentary series based on Rabbi Wein's history of the Jews in the twentieth century.



Adam S. Ferziger is a Professor in the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry at Bar-Ilan University, where he holds the Rabbi S.R. Hirsch Chair for Research on the Torah and *Derekh Erez* Movement. At the University of Oxford, he is co-convener of the annual Oxford Summer Institute on Modern and Contemporary Judaism. A past recipient of Bar-Ilan's "Outstanding Lecturer" prize, he is the author or editor of seven books, and focuses on the history of religious responses to modern and contemporary life.



Marc B. Shapiro holds the Weinberg Chair in Judaic Studies at the University of Scranton. A graduate of Brandeis (BA) and Harvard (PhD), he is a popular scholar in residence at synagogues around the world and has authored six books, two of which were National Jewish Book Award Finalists. Professor Shapiro's most recent work, *Iggerot Malkhei Rabbanan*, contains more than thirty years of correspondence with some of the world's most outstanding Torah scholars, and he is currently writing a book on the thought of Rav Kook.

Peter Geffen is the founder of The Abraham Joshua Heschel School (NY), considered unique in its integrated approach to curriculum and its social justice programming and today the largest pluralistic Jewish school in North America. Peter's career in Jewish education began with the Park Avenue Synagogue High School program in 1967, and he held a range of leadership positions, including senior staff roles with Ramah camps. In 2005 he founded KIVUNIM—a gap-year program studying about and traveling to 12 countries (from Morocco to India) and studying the origins and integration of Jewish life and culture throughout the world. In 2012 he received the Covenant Award. Peter served as a civil rights worker for Dr. Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and played several historic roles at MLK's funeral, including accompanying Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.



What is the teaching of Jewish history in Jewish schools supposed to accomplish? Is it an objective investigation of the past, to provide context for understanding contemporary Jewry, to engender a sense of collective memory and identity formation, or something else?

Adam Ferziger

We teach a range of Jewish disciplines. There are kids who love Bible, or language, or Talmud, or Jewish law. And then there are those who love history, maybe because it has a very human and folklorist element, or because it is stories and personalities. It has an audience; it's an important entry point for some people.

The French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr famously said, “the more things change the more they stay the same.” As a historian, I don’t subscribe to this. Every historical situation is *sui generis*. Nonetheless, there are aspects which are similar and the process that we gain from historical study yields two very important things—to learn to compare Jews from different eras, from different geographic places, and after you see the similarities, to recognize the distinctions, the differences. There are some narratives which try to portray everything as monolithic, the same: all *gedolim* (great Torah luminaries) are the same, all Jewish societies are the same, Sephardim and Ashkenazim are the same, Mizrahim and Europeans are the same. I understand the motivation to create some sort of solidarity and uniformity, but it is simply untrue and extraordinarily counterproductive. It leads us to be judgmental of people who don’t fit these artificial models. Jewish history testifies that there are multiple portals to Judaism, amazing avenues for creativity, and many different forms of Jewish expression. History can be a tremendous vehicle for appreciating difference within the framing of Judaism that **does not** necessarily come through as powerfully when you do other forms of Jewish learning.

Jewish history is also important because it helps you understand today in perspective. For example, the idea that less than a century after the Holocaust, the Prime Minister of the State of Israel would be mediating between the President of Russia and a Jewish President of Ukraine is mind-boggling when you’ve learned modern Jewish history.

I would add that Jewish history offers a profound tool as young people seek to articulate their personal Jewish identities. It gives individuals a sense of roots, both on family and broader collective levels. I teach an undergraduate course for foreign students in which we engage historical issues rigorously, but after we analyze them within their original context, we consider their comparative values for understanding contemporary Jewish issues. We study, for example, the **different** responses of Iberian/Sephardic and Franco-German/Ashkenazi Jews to forced conversion—it’s a powerful way to think about core notions of integration vs. enclavism, sacrifice, commitment, survival, quality of life, even immortality. Shabbetai Zevi is another really good vehicle for examining multiple themes. I do not see contemporary history instruction as an attempt to cover an agreed upon body of knowledge, I leave it to my student’s curiosity or personal need to learn more subjects. My role, as I understand it, is to facilitate their exposure to rich events and personalities through a critical analytic lens that can draw out the profundity of what lies within them.

Peter Geffen

Before I can address the specifics of your question I need to point out that only a tiny percentage of Jewish kids go to Jewish high schools where (even there) they learn only a little about ritual, holidays, and some Hebrew—and where there is almost no time for the “teaching” of history. What gets taught to little kids about Jewish history is not serious and often without much meaning or depth. You might call it Jewish “fairy tales.” Let’s also acknowledge that there are very few teachers in the system today who know much about Jewish history—and this must change if we are to address your question seriously. People who teach Torah text need to also know history, and people who teach history need to know Torah. But there is no concerted effort to create for the teacher a sense of the magnitude of the Jewish historical experience. The lack of Jewish historical education for our teachers strongly suggests that as a community we don’t really care about what happens in the classroom. In general studies, all teachers need to be trained and certified in their field, but we in Jewish education are not insisting on that at all. We have become complacent—as if the intellectual integrity and the educational opportunity lost are of no consequence.

I think it’s a mistake to talk about Jewish “history,” because history, to many, means names and dates and places. The term that I think we should use is Jewish “civilization,” because civilization refers to the extraordinary and rich experience of the Jewish people over thousands of years—art, music, architecture, geography, costume, food—the role and experience of the Jew within their host cultures across much of the globe for thousands of years.

Here is the beauty and uniqueness of Jewish civilization: We lived in over 50 countries of the world where we wore every costume, built in every architecture, designed in every art form, prayed in every musical mode, and we don’t even have our own cuisine—only a kosher version of what our neighbors ate. Even philosophically, Maimonides, the Rambam, was a Hellenist, an Aristotelian. We are the people of the world—but we don’t know anything about our own experience across that world. To me, this is quite bizarre. It’s a great tragedy that people don’t know our actual story. And it is painfully ironic that in our era when it is easier than ever to discover and recover our historical experience with the power of technology we continue to “teach” a simplistic and often negative rendering of our millennia of international experience. It’s inadequate to just know what Jews do, like put on tefillin or eat kosher food, and not know who the Jews who did those things were.

A properly designed educational experience within the realm of what I am calling Jewish civilization would powerfully contribute to a sense of identity. Textual literacy and/or knowledge about ritual observance and/or activities of *tikkun olam* in and of themselves cannot build identity, as is evident within the American Jewish universe (and probably within Israeli society as well). Identity is the product of rich immersive experiences.

Yitz Greenberg

I think that Jewish history has to accomplish all of the above. It needs to be based on an objective investigation of the past, it becomes relevant when applied to understanding our contemporary situation, and it serves a very important function in forging collective memory. When you remove any of those components you end up with distorted understandings. For example, if you take out

the objective part and you have students forming an identity based on teachings/historical events that they will later discover aren't the way they were taught, that causes even greater problems and may seriously undermine the foundations of their faith.

The other thing that needs to be added, in my opinion, is that a deep understanding of Jewish history serves an important theological purpose. It functions as a way in which to understand the *brit*, the covenant between humanity later focused and particularized in the *brit* with Abraham and at Sinai. The covenant is a partnership to repair the world to be a paradise (=Messianic age). The events confirm the *brit* (Exodus/Purim, etc.) or challenge it (*Hurban*, Holocaust). Typically, these challenges were not overcome until there was a reshaped vision and new understanding of the role of God and of the human partner. After the Destruction of the Second Temple, *Hazal* won out with their interpretation that God had invited humans to take greater responsibility in history and even to become full partners in Revelation through the *Torah Shebe'al Peh* (the Oral Law). Further events in Jewish history, down to our time, show how the partnership matured and changed, and guide us as to what that means in terms of the increased responsibility that we, the human partners, have in achieving the covenantal goals.

If you push me to choose between these three aspects of the meaning of and role of history, I would say that they are all critically important. Even if there isn't enough time in the school's program to do justice to the study of history, all three aspects need to be balanced into the inadequate time.

Marc Shapiro

It's all these things, collective memory, identity formation, community cohesiveness, but more important—of fundamental importance—is that to be an educated Jew, one needs to know one's history. Just like to be an educated American we need to know American history—it's required on US citizenship tests. Jews need to know their history too, and we often require converts to know some of that.

If you look at our holidays or the Torah's descriptions or Tanakh or Talmud, they often refer to things that happened in the past. Without knowing our past, we don't know where we are in the present, and we certainly can't understand where we're going in the future. So Jewish history has its own independent validity quite apart from identity formation or anything like that. We want intelligent, well-educated, Jewish citizens—and that won't happen without them knowing their history.

Knowing history gives a better sense of basic Torah issues. But just as not everyone needs to study Talmud at the same level, and that for some people there are other Jewish topics to be learned, not everyone wants to study Jewish history so intensively. I think that as a baseline level, you can cover what is necessary in two years in high school, maybe even one year if you have a really good curriculum. Everyone should get at least one year, and I think that in one year you can get from the destruction of the Second Temple until the present day, recognizing certain limitations—like you can't really cover the Holocaust or the rise of the State of Israel. You could cover the main trends, the main thinkers, and the main events. They don't need to go into the details of Rambam's philosophy, but they need to know who he is. They need to know about Jewish life in

medieval Europe, the pogroms, the ghettos, the Sephardic world. Two years would be better, and it wouldn't be like a university course with readings etc., but even in one year you could do a good concrete foundation.

Berel Wein

In my opinion and my experience, teaching Jewish History is to create a feeling of faith, *emunah*, an understanding of the unique role of the Jewish people in civilization—why we are the Chosen People—and a deep attachment to Torah study and Torah values, because Jewish history testifies that that is the real thread that has bound the Jewish people together for millennia.

It's not the teaching of facts or dates or even personalities. You need a passion here: to be proud, to be a Jew, to know what it is to be a Jew, to understand what it is to be a Jew. It's not just observance and *halakha*. There's an overarching picture here, and I think that Jewish history is the main tool in which this can be accomplished, over and above all other areas of Jewish knowledge. I mean, if you really know the story of the Jewish people it's almost impossible not to be a Jew; it's almost impossible not to be a good Jew. The main problem in the Jewish world today is ignorance, not secularism. It's just that nobody knows what it is to be Jewish.

For Ashkenazi Jewry, the era of Rashi and the *Ba'alei haTosafot* (Tosafists) is enormously important. To understand how they lived and survived in a medieval Christian hostile society and what they produced. For Sephardic Jewry, it would be the Spanish Golden Age, which is completely different. And then to understand that they are all one people. There is a common story which began at Sinai and includes everything we went through: the destructions of the two Temples; the recognition of the fact that we're in exile. If we produce people like Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam on the one hand and the Rambam and the Rashba on the other, then we're going to survive because they will guarantee the continuity of the Jewish people.

How do you navigate situations where the objective historical investigation does not support, or even clashes with the traditional narratives that shape our collective memory?

Adam Ferziger

As an academic, I usually don't have to deal with censorship. So much knowledge is so readily available at people's fingertips, so we can't pretend to hide it when they'll encounter it. That said, *Hanokh lana'ar al pi darko*, teach the child according to **their** way (*Proverbs 22:6*), is not just about cognitive levels—it has to be appropriate for who the kid is developmentally. At the same time, intellectual honesty—of course at the right age—is important on the level of explaining that what one is teaching is a certain narrative. One of the great contributions of postmodernity is our

understanding that we are limited when it comes to identifying something as the absolute truth. Therefore, by definition, when we present something, it is embedded in our personal perspective or proclivities. I hope that a trained history teacher offers grounded narratives for which there is strong evidence. Teachers should be able to say, “This is a powerful and compelling understanding of Jewish history, but you should be aware that there are other well-trained historians who look at some of these issues a little differently.” I don’t think that this compromises the effectiveness of the teaching. On the contrary, it actually produces greater respect. A really good teacher will say, “Now you take the facts and run with them.”

Peter Geffen

For many, Jewish history has come down to a combination of the Holocaust and Zionism and the State of Israel. There is a gap of at least 2000 years, and often longer. Let’s be honest, teaching about the Holocaust, in most cases, is about engendering some form of guilt, hoping that if the kids feel guilty then they’ll want to be Jewish or will feel an obligation, a moral responsibility to do so. And teaching a history of the State of Israel is really complicated today, and more so tomorrow. (There are 100,000 Jewish kids graduating from high school in the United States this year and only about 1% of the non-Orthodox kids are involved in post-high school gap year Israel programs. A gap-year in Israel may be the only way for a reasonable or honest teaching about Israel to take place.) For the overwhelming majority, we teach fantasies about Israel—we never mention the Palestinians (except to talk about terrorists); we never talk about the many conflicts within Israeli society (or we pay lip-service to them if we mention them at all). Who are we fooling? We are ahistorical. And when a Jewish kid gets to college, it becomes impossible for them to be both Jewishly- (meaning in this case Israel-) committed and involved in the typical and characteristic liberal causes that always attract the overwhelming majority of Jewish students. If they want to be a liberal, not a radical, but a liberal on campus, they are told that they are not welcome within liberal organizations because their Israel commitments disqualify them. So they have to drop something, and the something is more often than not the Jewish side. (I am certainly not endorsing or justifying such exclusionary tactics, but I do believe they have been exacerbated by the type of Israel education which continues to typify our approach.)

The same is true with all of Jewish history, not just today’s hot-button issues. We have a magnificent and fascinating story: our lives in over 50 countries of the world integrated and infused with so much of the native local culture(s). To devolve our story down to one pogrom after another leading to the Holocaust is neither honest to the historical record nor inspiring to the future. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel posed and answered the following question: “What lends meaning to history? The promise of the future.” Instead of tainting history, and ourselves, with propaganda or fantasy or both, we need to be comprehensive and truthful. Presenting the facts with honesty is the most powerful and beautiful gift we can give the next generation. That’s how one builds a genuine sense of loyalty, of fidelity. And if Jewish identity is going to be assured by Jewish education (which is certainly one of, if not its major goal), it is going to come from

developing the sense of fidelity which comes as a result of grappling with often discomfiting truth. The teaching of Jewish history must be honest, including the full and positive portrayal of so much of the Jewish experience that is currently overlooked.

Yitz Greenberg

When we present a narrative based on information that doesn't stand up to scrutiny, we are doing a terrible disservice. Nowadays, with so much data available on the internet, it is easy to check what is based on evidence and not. And when students get to college, at some point they're going to discover that what they've been taught is based on a flawed foundation. What do you think is going to happen then? In many cases they just discard the whole religion thing because they can't trust it. That doesn't mean that we can't present the data and say there are multiple interpretations of it, or that you think that the data points to this conclusion, but you can't be 100% sure.

Take, for example, the case of Bible criticism. The academic field right now challenges our dominant model of canon and revelation, yet we continue to uphold the basic truth of *Torah min hashamayim*, i.e., that we are in touch with a Higher Eternal Power. The discussion is about how the details got recorded, and our understanding about that is in flux. Various Orthodox scholars have tried different ways of incorporating critical insights—such as Mordecai Breuer on different voices incorporated into Torah. This is a task for Orthodox scholars in the coming generation. The compelling nature of Torah is not lost by admitting that our interpretive model does not have all the answers at this moment. Many more lose their faith when they are given false assurances or are shielded from alternative views and then discover that the critical approach is too powerful to simply be dismissed or covered up.

The same holds true for not whitewashing our historical Torah. What would be so terrible for students to discover that some of the people they hold up as heroes had this flaw or that failure? Do our heroes need to be superheroes for us to respect and value them? And if there was a little dirt on their image, does that make them less important or does it make them more real? The Torah's unvarnished account of our ancestors teaches us to appreciate them despite their humanity, or maybe because of it. And the same is true for other spheres of Jewish learning.

Some people were afraid of change/modern ideals eroding Torah as they confronted modernity, and I think we suffered because they responded by "freezing" the tradition in place. One of the students of R. Yisrael Salanter, R. Eliyahu Kretinga, opposed any change even if it was an improvement. He argued forcefully against critical learning and incorporating history, even though he knew that it would add greatly to our understanding. He argued that the threat against Judaism was so severe that it rendered traditional Judaism into the status of a *gosses*, someone on their deathbed. The *halakha* is that when there is a *gosses*, you are not permitted to do anything to them, even if might be beneficial, because the slightest movement could kill them. He understood that modernity could be beneficial, but was so afraid that it could kill Judaism that he suggested that our policy be that there absolutely no changes. Approaches like that have been very harmful—especially in our time when academia and/or the internet will expose our students to all the alternatives.

Marc Shapiro

I understand that sometimes you need to tread gently if these narratives are regarded as the accepted truth, but we certainly can't be in the business of teaching falsehoods. We need to be honest and we need to teach in accordance with what we think is the best truth as we know it; the job of the historian is not to support preconceived notions and narratives. You might say that the job of the day school is to push those narratives, but in the information age that we're in, all the information is available, so ignoring the uncomfortable stuff is counterproductive. We need to be able to face the unpleasant facts and still be proud of our history and what we've accomplished. I would not use a class even in high school or elementary school to create myths that will not be supported as they go through life.

Berel Wein

History depends on its interpretation; there are no objective facts. Everyone comes with their own bias. My bias is that my grandfather was not a liar and that his grandfather was not a liar and his grandfather saw the Gaon of Vilna. That gives me a certain perspective. Take someone who never knew his grandfather or never had a grandfather who knew the Gaon of Vilna. He will say, "OK, he was a genius, but what does it have got to do with us?" Jewish day schools are supposed to come with this prejudice—the prejudice that the Torah is from Sinai. And if they want to be objective, then it's useless.

I'm an American Civil War buff. I've read countless books, seen the documentaries, visited the battlefields. My feelings towards the United States of America are based on the American Civil War, on the fact that 600,000 fell, and on both sides they were falling for a cause. That made America special to me. The very history of the Jewish people is they struggled for a cause. Everything we do is based on achieving that cause. So Jewish history should make people feel that they're special. If a person feels that he or she is special, then the person has self-confidence and self-identity and can stand up to the buffeting of life. Learning Jewish history gives us immunity to the challenges we face every day.

The problem is when we think that we are just human beings, that everybody is equal. The basis of Judaism is that we're not equal; we are a *mamlechet kohanim* and a *goy kadosh*, a nation of priests and a holy people. That's not popular today—that's considered racist.

How do you instill that feeling that Jews are special? Jewish history can do that. Not all histories are equal.

Anyone who tells you that he's an objective historian is not telling the truth. Everyone has prejudice. He has the right to his prejudice, I'm entitled to mine.

Should Jewish history be taught separate from, integrated with, or parallel to general history? What do we gain when teaching Jewish History separate from the general history of the eras being explored? What do we lose?

Adam Ferziger

It's very important to understand that the Jews live in the context of a broader world. Jewish history is a wonderful opportunity to look at the interface between particularism and universalism that we all experience on different levels, and the distinct ways that they were balanced or when Jews were challenged to balance between those tensions.

Some would say that there is a danger of banalizing the Jewish example, that it could lead to a comparative religion approach that undermines the beauty and uniqueness of "our" heritage. So to speak, "they have theirs and we have ours, and there's nothing special or unique in our story." To my mind, a lot depends on how we teach complex subjects. Good teachers develop tools to navigate between understanding our history in a context and inspiring kids to a core commitment to their people, which is what day schools want to do.

The reason, I think, that I see such importance in teaching Jewish history in the context of general history is because all people are created in the image of God; we are a part of humanity. We share the basic elements of the human condition. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein utilized the study of Christian humanist literature to gain insights into the human condition that was meaningful for him as a Jew. The recognition that through the study of History we are part of God's human creation is a critical one. Comparative history is a supremely important tool in seeking to cultivate that value. Hyperparticularism, focusing exclusively on one's own story, can be very dangerous.

Peter Geffen

I don't think that you can have an understanding of the Jewish experience over the ages without an understanding of societies, cultures, and religions amongst whom we lived; the Jews and their host cultures were in constant interaction. Many teach about the so-called "Golden Age in Spain." Do they explore why it happened? What was going on in Muslim (Moorish) civilization that allowed them to open up to Jews? What was it about Islam that allowed for this? It's not enough to know what was happening, but how that created a context for Jewish life. Obviously exploring a simple question like this enhances the sense of optimism, of positive potential, in the student.

How does Hasdai ibn Shaprut, a rabbi, become a prime minister in an Arab caliphate? Isn't that important to know? What was the nature of the society in Babylonia that allowed for the creation of the academies of Sura and Pumpedita that still speak to us thousands of years after they existed? In medieval Europe, what is that tension that turned some Jews into Christians? How does a person grow up in a religious home, love their parents, and convert to another religion?

What was the dynamic and is that different today?

Peoplehood is a broad and deep concept—it links us to our roots. Without a knowledgeable link to the past it's like a family saying: "Grandpa was a really interesting guy, but he's dead. Gone." That's not what we do in a healthy family; it's not the way we live. Heschel addressed this question in the following way (and not as a historian, but as a Rabbi, as a spiritual teacher):

*The riches of a soul are stored up in its memory. This is the test of character—not whether a man follows the daily fashion, **but whether the past is alive in his present.** When we want to understand ourselves, to find out what is most precious in our lives, we search our memory. Memory is the soul's witness...*

*Memory is a source of faith. **To have faith is to remember.** Jewish faith is a recollection of that which happened to Israel in the past. The events in which the spirit of God became a reality stand before our eyes painted in colors that never fade. Much of what the Bible demands can be comprised in one word: Remember.*

Jews have not preserved the ancient monuments; they have retained the ancient moments.

Certainly, the memory that Heschel speaks of is not of one tragedy after the other.

The Dalai Lama met with my KIVUNIM students in India in 2019. He explained to them that from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective the only important thing is the self...BUT, a self serving the whole. Then he spoke to them as Jews and conveyed what he understood they were capable of based upon his understanding of what they had historically and collectively been through. What he expected of them as a result of their history.

Jewish history in isolation undermines what we call world consciousness, which I believe is an important force in the development of a strong and positive contemporary Jewish identity. World consciousness is made up of the Jewish historical and cultural experience, but not in isolation. Rather within the places Jews lived and the cultures they absorbed. That interaction was mostly positive, otherwise, you and I would not be here today having this conversation. Please don't conclude that I ignore our people's trauma after the Second World War, I do not. But we've got to grow out of that limitation to re-inform ourselves of the richness and expansiveness of who we are. Knowing the depth and richness of the Jewish historical experience links us to others. That linkage, crossing almost all international borders allows the young Jew to cross barriers that separate people and build bridges so vitally necessary for the greatest gifts of all: justice and peace. There can be no greater task for the modern educator.

Yitz Greenberg

One of the things that Rav Soloveitchik taught, sometimes quietly, was that Judaism is a religion not only for Jews, but that it is concerned with the world. How can we not learn Jewish history in the context of where Jews lived, how they impacted on their environment and how their environment impacted on them? Doesn't Jewish history include what happens to the world?

Take, for example, the ghetto mentality which came to dominate medieval Jewish thinking. Of course, it was connected to the reality that there was a lot of Jewish suffering, and that the notion of “the goyim are out to get us” was very real. You can’t understand that if you don’t understand what was happening around the Jews of their time. And to be truthful, it could be that the attitude of Jewish superiority and Gentile inferiority actually saved them. But that assumption needed to change once Jews encountered acceptance and democracy in modernity. These views, unrevised, damaged our credibility with the Jewish emergence from the ghetto.

Jewish history and world history are intertwined. I would say the same for Jewish history and other Jewish learning. How can we really understand what is happening in Tanakh or the Talmud without understanding the contexts in which they happened and were written? I know that there are those who disagree, who think that the sacred subjects are sacred and who say things like, “the color of Abaye’s pajamas is not relevant for understanding the Gemara.” But that’s not what learning Jewish history is about. Historical record shows that Jews learned from and integrated ideas/values from the cultures around them. Also that the Torah and *Torah Shebe’al Peh* spoke in the language of their time and location. Take, for example, *Pirkei Avot*. It’s one of the most beloved and frequently quoted Jewish texts. Did you know that at the time that it was written there were similar texts being written, and there’s a lot of overlap between those texts and ours, so there’s a good chance that they impacted on and learned from each other.

Marc Shapiro

Jewish history should not be placed together with Jewish studies, it should be part of the secular curriculum, much like American history or world history, but should not be integrated into general history. In general history, Jewish history is tiny, it’s like a footnote—and that’s always the case with the histories of minority groups—so it deserves its own focus. Now, of course, you can’t study the history of Jews in Europe without having any understanding of what’s going on in the outside, but you shouldn’t combine the two.

Berel Wein

We don’t live in a bubble or a vacuum. We never did. You cannot understand the exile from Spain without knowing the history of Spain from 1391 to 1492. Why did it happen? Why did the Golden Age of Spain and Spanish Jewry, after 800 years, suddenly end? You need to understand the reconquest, the receding influence of the Moslem world, and that the Popes became more aggressive—and that all of these converged. The same is true for all of our exiles—Babylonia, North Africa, Russia. We need to understand what was happening in their societies as a whole, and learn from those and apply them to understand our contemporary reality as well.

Jewish history is part of the general history. The Torah already taught us this. *Ze sefer toldot adam*, this is the history of humanity (*Genesis* 5:1). If there would not have been a Nimrod pushing people into the furnace, there would never have been an Avraham to challenge him. If there would not have been a Doctor’s Plot under Stalin, a million Russian Jews would never have left.

Jewish schools have limited instructional time. What priority should Jewish History have in the curriculum? Should Jewish history be classified as Torah study?

Yitz Greenberg

If you are learning Jewish history to understand what impacted us and how we impacted on the world and what God's role in this world is and how that has changed and what our role in this world is and how that has changed—isn't that Torah? Such history should be studied as a form of Torah. I would say *birkhat HaTorah* on that. The blessing indicates that what I am doing is pursuing a sacred pursuit and, in fact, the *berakha* transforms the psychology of this pursuit into a religious one. Why is understanding Torah and Talmud more deeply by placing them in historical context, any less of a sacred pursuit?

In my opinion, if there is no alternative to find time for history, we should reduce some of the time spent on Gemara and *halakha*. If we spent more time exploring history and less time on some of the other things we are doing, that would be a very valuable change. Not that learning Gemara is not important. But unless it leads to an understanding of our mission in this world, unless it yields a worldview and a coherent values system, then it loses much of its impact. Perhaps our curricular time would be best spent pursuing those subjects which bring people to a world view as well as a more persuasive understanding of their relationship with the rest of the world and with God.

Marc Shapiro

It's certainly not at the level of Talmud or *Humash*, but it is vital, for the simple reason that you can't understand much of what's going on if you don't know what's happening when. Like when did the Purim story and the story of Hanuka happen. How many people think that Hanuka happened before Purim?

Berel Wein

One of the great things about *hasidut* and the *mussar* movement is that they took everyday events in life and turned them into *talmud Torah*. Going to the grocery, everyday encounters with people—they are all *talmud Torah*. To that extent, history is *talmud Torah*, certainly in the sense of learning Jewish values.

Unfortunately, the standard contemporary definition of *talmud Torah* is pretty narrow. How many *dapim* (pages) of Gemara have you covered? How many *mishnayot* did you memorize? I don't mean, God forbid, to say that those aren't important, but that's not the ball game. Those may be tactics, but they are not the strategy. If you look at Jewish history over the ages, only a tiny

percentage of the Jewish people studied Gemara in the last 1500 years, and yet the Jewish people survived and produced great Talmudic scholars and the Torah was alive.

The blunt truth is that four hours a day of Gemara is not for everybody. The task is to find the people that it is for—they should develop into the *geonim* (great scholars) and the *poskim* (halakhic decisors) that we need. Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky told me to be careful not to impose the education appropriate for the elite few upon the masses. Unfortunately, our schools throw everyone into the same boat. Well, not everybody fits. The education our students receive has to train not just the top scholars, but the people who are going to be everyday good Jews.

I was eleven years old when my grandfather enrolled me in the local *yeshiva*. The *rebbe* started every morning with a prayer: “We are fortunate that we were given the Torah to learn, that we get up early to recite *Shema*.” At the time I thought that he was a crazy, but now I understand that he was trying to convey that we were not learning “a subject”—our learning was a special *mitzva*. Our *rebbe* understood that and produced a great generation of Jewish doers.

If Jewish history is taught as supposedly objective knowledge, then it is certainly not *talmud Torah*. But if it teaches Jewish identity, Jewish values, Jewish uniqueness, God’s role in our lives, then maybe some of the more traditional learning, which is less appropriate for the masses, should make room for the foundations of Judaism that all of our students need.

Saying a *brakha*, that’s a very good question.



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BREAKING DOWN THE SILOS:

INTEGRATING JEWISH AND GENERAL HISTORY

Jonathan Krasner

Jonathan Krasner is the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Associate Professor of Jewish Education Research at Brandeis University and the recipient of two National Jewish Book Awards for *The Benderly Boys and American Jewish Education* (2011) and *Hebrew Infusion: Language and Community at American Jewish Summer Camps* (2020). He is currently writing a history of the Jewish day school movement in the United States.



Shortly after I began teaching World-Jewish History at Ramaz in the early 1990s I had a clarifying moment that seemed to justify that school's integrated approach to Jewish History education. My ninth-grade students were studying the Ancient World and the day's lesson involved a primary source comparative analysis of the text of the Cyrus Cylinder and the first three chapters of the *Book of Ezra*. The former text extolls the Persian ruler Cyrus the Great for repatriating conquered people and restoring their temples, while the latter includes Cyrus's edict allowing the Judeans to return from exile in Babylonia and the rebuilding of the Temple. I divided the students into small groups and provided them with an English translation of the Cyrus Cylinder text, and a side-by-side Hebrew- English version of the Biblical text. They were settling down to work when suddenly I heard a voice from the back of the room: "Hey, wait. Koresh is the same person as King Cyrus? Wow! That's crazy." I just smiled and said, "When you compare the texts it will make even more sense to you."

In time, I only became more confirmed in my conviction that students were apt to compartmentalize their learning. A Jewish History teacher could not assume that students would intuitively draw the necessary through-lines between their learning in general History and Jewish History unless the learning environment modeled and encouraged them to make those connections. Thus, the advantage of an integrated curriculum appeared to be obvious: It facilitated students' abilities to place the Jewish experience into the wider political, economic, cultural, and social context. It provided an opportunity to present Jews as integral to, rather than apart from, central historical narratives about society and culture.

Sequestering the Jewish experience for separate treatment is reminiscent of how women and People of Color are often relegated to easily overlooked sidebars and captioned photos in History textbooks. Historian Nancy Bazelon Goldstone [points out](#) that when women are "shunted off to the side," whether in History book sidebars or well-meaning observances like Women's History Month, they "remain a subset of history rather than integral components of recognized major events."

One need not go as far as Goldstone, who recommends that Women's History Month be abolished and that universities disband their women's studies departments, to recognize that her fundamental point is valid. So too, Jewish History is World and American History.

When I embarked on an academic career and immersed myself in the learning-sciences literature, I found that an integrated History curriculum also made sense from the perspective of learning theory. Among the most fundamental cognitive processes is the ability to apply knowledge and skills to a new situation. Frequently that "transfer of learning," as it is referred to in the literature, is virtually reflexive. A child who learns to climb a tree instinctively applies that knowledge when presented with a climbing wall, just as that same child can easily make the leap from crayons to colored chalk and magic markers. These are examples of what the literature refers to as "near transfer," that is, applying knowledge in situations that are roughly similar to that where one acquired the original learning. It is considerably more difficult, however, to apply acquired knowledge to very different contexts. For example, students who learn History frequently find it difficult to apply historical knowledge and concepts to current events, nor do they easily apply concepts learned in geometry to their shop or robotics courses. These are examples of what is called "far transfer." Educational researcher David Perkins provides an accessible introduction to the transfer of learning in his 2009 book, *Making Learning Whole: How Seven Principles of Education Can Transform Education*. He cautions teachers not to rely on what he calls "the Bo Peep theory of transfer" after the popular nursery rhyme. Transfer of learning won't just take care of itself like Bo

Peep's sheep, who returned home "wagging their tails behind them."

In day schools, learning transfer between general and Jewish studies is further impeded by the tendency to compartmentalize the Jewish and the secular. Day school students have internalized the notion that secular learning and Jewish learning operate in separate domains and according to different rules. For example, researcher Tali Hyman Zerkowicz's [observations](#) in a Jewish community high school revealed major dissonances between general and Jewish studies learning. The contrasts are bound to be more pronounced in many Orthodox schools where the boundaries between religious and secular studies are more dramatically demarcated.

Applying what we know about the transfer of learning to my original anecdote, it is not surprising that my student initially compartmentalized what she knew about the Babylonian captivity and the return of the exiles, presumably from her elementary school Jewish studies courses, and what she was learning about the Persians. It was only when I prompted transfer by placing the texts in conversation with one another that she was able to break down her mental silos. As Perkins explains, far transfer is more likely to be successful when it is shepherded through cuing and practice. An integrated History curriculum provides ample opportunity for teachers to cultivate transfer using these strategies.

The limits of transfer between general and Jewish History were demonstrated in an exploratory study of eleventh graders at two Jewish high schools (one Orthodox and one pluralistic) who were asked to place ten seminal events in modern Jewish History on a

sequential modern European History timeline. Most struggled with the exercise, even when the Jewish History events had a direct causal connection to those listed on the timeline (e.g., the French Revolution and Jewish emancipation in Western Europe; World War I and the Balfour Declaration, etc.). All of the students had studied these events in separate modern and Jewish History courses, yet they struggled to make the connections, to place Jewish people and events in a wider context.

One of the primary reasons why students study History, after all, is to understand change over time and how the society we live in came to be. When schools silo Jewish History they are subverting that goal and likely perpetuating misperceptions and misunderstandings, particularly in relation to claims of Jewish exceptionalism.

As we examine the challenge of transfer in Jewish History education, one thing is certain: Salvation will not be found in the pages of the typical World History textbook. Jews are frequently rendered even more invisible in these books than women. Ben Jacobs and others [have shown](#) that widely-adopted world and U.S. History textbooks rarely mention the Jews, and that even treatments of Jews in relation to immigration, antisemitism, and the Holocaust are typically cursory, while examinations of Zionism and the Arab-Israeli conflict are often politically fraught. If anything, thoroughly integrated World- or U.S.-Jewish History courses can serve as a needed corrective to the sins of omission and commission in standard textbooks.

Any meditation on the merits and drawbacks of teaching an integrated History curriculum would be incomplete without raising the issue of staffing. Among the most common refrains I hear from school officials is that an

integrated World-Jewish History sequence is impractical because it is very difficult to find teachers who are qualified to teach both sides of the curriculum. As a former History department chair, I have a lot of sympathy for this argument. But as researcher Sivan Zakai [points out](#), many teachers who are currently teaching stand-alone Jewish History have little or no pedagogical content knowledge or training in History teaching methods. They may be exemplary Jewish role models but they have little understanding of History as a discipline. In their well-meaning hands, Jewish History often becomes an endless parade of facts and dates or, worse, stories of heroism and woe shaped by what historian Salo Baron decried as a “lachrymose conception of Jewish History.” A talented History teacher—whether their expertise is Jewish History, U.S. History, East Asia, Latin America, etc.—has acquired the skills and habits of thinking to expand their pedagogical content knowledge through reading or taking online or summer courses, hopefully with the support of their school’s professional development funds and possibly a small stipend. While it is beyond the scope of this article, my fervent hope is that academics and funders can cooperate on an initiative to train mid-career general History teachers to teach Jewish History.

It is useful to recall cognitive psychologist Sam Wineburg’s [admonition](#) that teaching historical thinking is no mean feat. Essentially you are training students to navigate between the familiar and the strange, a “usable past” and “the past as a foreign country.” You are also teaching them to think critically, to read critically yet empathetically, and to balance multiple perspectives. Absent these skills, History devolves into a monotonous and repetitive exercise in teacher storytelling

and student memorization and regurgitation, devoid of any larger purpose. An integrated History curriculum taught by a teacher with a background in historical methods as well as pedagogical content knowledge is most likely to cultivate historical thinking skills.

When our schools fail to cultivate historical understanding, they not only deny our students insights into how our society came to be, they also blunt History education's power to motivate civic participation. I am not thinking merely about group identity and loyalty, although those are important. When we deny our students an appreciation for historical contingency and societal change over time, we are encouraging complacency and snuffing out any hope for a better future. To **quote** scholars Linda Levstik and Keith Barton, "history is a work in progress" that "helps us to picture possible futures." In this broken world, we want our students to see themselves as change-agents rather than victims.

As Jewish educators, we are naturally concerned about Jewish identity formation and recognize History's power to foster a sense of belonging and pride. In **the words** of historian Peter Stearns: "Merely defining the group in the present pales against the possibility of forming an identity based on a rich past." I can imagine that some would argue that an integrated curriculum would be antithetical to this goal on the grounds that it relativizes the Jewish experience and thereby undermines claims of Jewish chosenness. (Show me any national group that does not conceive of itself as exceptional and superior!) An easy rejoinder is that this tension is inescapable as long as Jewish History is taught qua History, regardless of whether it is integrated or siloed.

But a stronger argument in my view cuts to the heart of the type of Jewish citizen that our schools are trying to produce. If our goal is compartmentalization; if like Judah Leib Gordon, we are counseling our students to be Americans on the street and Jews at home; or worse, if the (not so) hidden curriculum of our Jewish day school is Jewish chauvinism and contempt for those outside the fold, then a convincing argument can be made for a separate Jewish History course. On the other hand, if we want our students to wear their Jewish identities proudly and to live as fully integrated and engaged American Jews in an open society; and if we believe that Judaism and modernity must inevitably coexist, at times in creative synthesis and at times in productive tension, then an integrated curriculum becomes a *sine qua non*.



HISTORICAL THINKING AND JEWISH IDENTITY

Adina Shoulson

Adina Shoulson is the SAR High School (Riverdale, NY) History Department Chair and has helped develop the history curriculum. Ms. Shoulson received her B.A. with honors from Columbia University with a major in Religious Studies and a concentration in Psychology. She earned her M.Phil. at New York University in Modern Jewish History.



For years, Stanford Professor Sam Wineburg has urged history teachers to go “**beyond the bubble**” and teach students historical thinking rather than rote memorization. Preparing students to be historical thinkers by teaching them to read sources critically and contextualize information are the guiding goals of my history classes. When I teach World War I, for example, I ask students to evaluate primary sources by questioning their reliability and comparing them to other contemporaneous perspectives. When I teach Jewish History, I take the same approach to the study of Jewish texts, encouraging students to read them in their historical context: to appreciate the author’s intended audience and acknowledge the author’s purpose. But, unlike my teaching of World War I, I have an additional goal when I teach Jewish History: to shape and strengthen my students’ Jewish identities.

While these apparently disparate goals—to foster critical thinking and to foster Jewish identity—don’t have to conflict, they can exist in tension with one another, and accomplishing both requires planning and creativity. The tension can emerge when sources’ varied perspectives expose students to negative aspects of the Jewish story or to perspectives that do not reflect the values of the school or parent body. For me, however, these moments of tension are actually among the richest of my teaching life because they hold the most potential for engaging students in deep, meaningful reflection that can result in a stronger Jewish identity. To fulfill critical thinking alongside the growth of Jewish identity, I draw on primary texts that express diverse points of view while giving students a non-judgmental space in which to reflect on their own connections to, and occasional discomfort with, these perspectives.

For instance, our 9th and 10th grade history curricula integrate general history with Jewish history, which allows us to present Jewish history within its broader political, social, and intellectual context. One of our richest explorations occurs during the Jewish history unit that follows our study of the French Revolution through Napoleon. After discussing the manifestation of Enlightenment values through the Revolution’s efforts to protect civil rights for all citizens, I ask how emancipation would impact the Jews, drawing on our earlier discussions, but applying them in a way that feels more personal to my students.

This Jewish history unit extends beyond the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution into the 19th century and the emergence of Jewish denominations in Germany. This content helps students understand the diversity of Jewish life that they observe today, so we begin in the present, enabling students to see, from the outset, the impact of history on their contemporary lives. My colleague and I crafted four fictional personalities that speak to different expressions of 21st century Jewish identity.

Yankl Rosenbaum is a Satmar Hasid who lives in Boro Park and works at B & H Photo in Manhattan. He speaks Yiddish at home with his wife and children, avoids socializing with non-Jews, and shuns the internet.

Sarah Weinblum is a Reform rabbi committed to tikkun olam. She partners with the local church and mosque to address food insecurity in her community and crafts her weekly sermons around the Torah portion and social justice issues.

Jacob Smith's father is Jewish but his mother is not, and he aspires to serve in the US Congress or even the Senate.

Rachel Cohen recently married her wife Gila at a small COVID-friendly ceremony conducted by her family's rabbi. They plan to send their children to a local Jewish day school.

After reading these brief biographies, I ask students to consider why these Jewish identities would have been impossible 300 years ago. What changed to make Jewish identity so diverse and flexible?

This activity prompts a discussion about the impact of the Enlightenment and emancipation on the Jews followed by an examination of the ideologies of Abraham Geiger, Samson Raphael Hirsch, Zecharias Frankel, and Moshe Sofer that presents all of these thinkers as reformers. Each faced the challenge of preserving Judaism in the face of progress during a new era when Jewish affiliation was voluntary. Each negotiated rational challenges to faith and new ideas about national identity. Each strove to safeguard the essence of Judaism and fulfill the Jewish mission as he saw it. Students analyze primary sources from all of these thinkers so that they can hear, in the writers' own (translated) words, what they prioritized and what they sacrificed to achieve their goals.

The final assignment in the unit is a personal reflection that asks: Which approach or approaches to progress and change do you find most comfortable and compelling, and why?

I then ask students to reflect on these two points in their responses:

- Does this approach match the way you identify as a Jew?
- Which do you think is best for promoting the survival of Jewish tradition in the modern age or "preserving Judaism in an era of choice?"

There are no right answers to these questions, and I am careful not to judge students. They can be assessed on their understanding and application of the texts' ideas but not on their opinions. I am consistently moved by the honesty and thoughtfulness of students' responses. The exercise encourages students to reflect on their personal connections to Judaism as well as to the challenges of modernity; it pushes them to see themselves in a chain of Jewish history, grappling with the same issues and pressures that Jews confronted in the past. For students who may have been quick to judge an approach that differs from their own, this activity encourages them to recognize that individuals' positions are often responses to external pressures, and all are rooted in legitimate values. Finally, by articulating their views, students become more active participants in their Jewish journeys. While they may still be under the influence of their families and teachers, by defending an approach to Jewish survival, they become active shapers of their Jewish lives and of the Jewish future.

This year, my colleague and I developed a new unit to expose students to the rich and diverse lives of Jewish teens in interwar Poland. After studying that time period more generally, students learned about many of the Jewish youth groups present in Polish society during these years. They then read excerpts from autobiographies written by Jewish teens from this time as part of an essay competition conducted by [YIVO](#). These autobiographies offer an intimate glimpse into the pressures and opportunities these youth felt, pressure to figure out who they are and how to express their Judaism. My students were surprised to realize that, despite significant differences in

their experiences, they could relate to these struggles. To help my students further probe the lives of these youth, I had them create an Instagram account or TikTok story to explore their aspirations and fears.

Addressing multiple goals is not easy, but in teaching Jewish history, I believe that it is necessary. To ignore the goal of teaching students to be critical thinkers about their Jewish past would be to minimize and dishonor that past. To pass up the opportunity to cultivate the students' Jewish identity would be to miss the chance to help students find meaning in the Jewish past, an important personal and educational goal. To be able to do both is the gift of teaching an integrated curriculum, and to have fun while doing it is rewarding to both the teacher and the students.

Special thanks to my colleague Rebecca Wolf who collaborated with me developing the two units described in this article.



JEWISH HISTORY AND MEMORY

Martin Herskovitz

Martin Herskovitz is a poet, philanthropist, and activist for Holocaust remembrance. Together with Efrat Bigman he developed *Yozrim Zikaron*, an arts-based educational program in Hebrew for Holocaust remembrance. The English counterpart to this program, **Creating Memory**, was crafted together with The Lookstein Center. He is a Spiegel Fellow for public activism in the Finkler Institute for Holocaust Studies in Bar-Ilan University.



Jews remember. There are 169 places in the Torah which command us to remember, to recall, to not forget, and to commemorate. You might think that there would be an accompanying imperative to study history. After all, doesn't memory require a knowledge of the content that we are supposed to remember? Yet there is no such imperative. It seems that, even though historical events represent the basis for memory, fulfillment of the commandments to remember in the Jewish tradition has very little to do with historical fact. The commandments instruct *that* we remember but offer little in the sense of rigorous requirements of *what* we are to remember (the exception being Rabbinic discussions of what to include in the recitation at the Seder). The connection between memory and history in the Jewish tradition needs to be examined more closely.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's ***Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*** highlights the gap between history and collective memory in the Jewish tradition. He writes that "the quintessential exercise in Jewish group memory," the Passover Seder contains very little historical information about the events of the Exodus. One can perform all the commandments of remembering without having much historical fact about the event. Yerushalmi writes: "The Hebrew Bible seems to have no hesitations in commanding memory. Its injunctions to remember are unconditional, and even when not commanded, remembrance is always pivotal." At the same time, he argues that the biblical injunction to remember has little to do with history or with curiosity about the past. In other words, we are commanded to remember with seemingly sparse details about the event.

This non-specificity is not to say that Jewish history is not important. In the end, when a Jew fulfills the commandment to remember, most of what he remembers will be based on historical data, and the discussions during the Passover Seder are often filled with historical information. That being said, the lack of specificity regarding which information we are required to remember focuses our attention on the dynamic of memory rather than on history. Australian author and poet Lily Brett, vividly argues the importance of memory of facts in her poem "I Keep Forgetting."

*I keep forgetting
the facts and statistics
and each time
I need to know them
I look up books
these books line
twelve shelves
in my room
I know where to go
to confirm the fact
that in the Warsaw Ghetto
there were 7.2 people per room
and in Lodz
they allocated
5.8 people
to each room
I forget
over and over again
that one third of Warsaw
was Jewish
and in the ghetto
they crammed 500,000 Jews
into 2.4 per cent
of the area of the city
and how many
bodies were they burning
in Auschwitz
at the peak of their production
twelve thousand a day
I have to check
and re-check
and did I dream
that at 4pm on the 19th January
58,000 emaciated inmates
were marched out of Auschwitz
was I right*

*to remember that in Bergen Belsen
from the 4th-13th of April 1945
28,000 Jews arrived from other camps
I can remember
hundreds and hundreds
of phone numbers
phone numbers
I haven't phoned
for twenty years
are readily accessible
and I can remember
people's conversations
and what someone's wife
said to someone else's husband
what a good memory
you have,
people tell me.*

Prioritizing memory can be helpful in choosing what to focus on from the incredibly broad and rich well of Jewish historical knowledge. Following the Biblical imperative and Brett's example, it would seem that our energies should be focused on that which enables memory, and that the pedagogical approaches should be those which will facilitate this memory. Continuing Brett's theme, I would like to use Holocaust education as an example of how to focus on memory rather than on information.

Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, in his "Let the Memorial Hill Remember," discusses the role of commemoration replacing the need for personal memory:

*Let the memorial hill remember instead
of me,
that's what it's here for. Let the park in-
memory-of remember.
Let the street that's-named-for
remember.
Let the well-known building remember,
Let the synagogue that's named after
God remember
Let the rolling Torah scroll remember, let
the Yizkor prayer
in memory of the dead remember. Let
the flags remember
those multicolored shrouds of history:
the bodies they wrapped
have long since turned to dust. Let the
dust remember.
Let the rubbish remember at the gate.
Let the afterbirth remember.
Let the beasts of the field and birds of
the heavens eat and remember.
Let all of them remember so that I can
rest.*

The poem highlights the difficulty of instilling memory in students, especially when we are talking about unpleasant memories. It is much easier to create constructs of commemoration instead of actual remembering. It is also much easier to have students learn reams of information about the Holocaust, but that doesn't ensure that the Holocaust will be instilled in the student's memory for the long term. Despite the difficulty, Amichai argues in the poem that there is no substitute for personal memory. Only people can remember, not the street or the Torah Scroll or a printed prayer; these are only cues to motivate us to create memory.

Let's explore a single line from the poem to delve a bit deeper. Toward the end of the poem he writes, "Let the rubbish remember at the gate." The Hebrew word he used, translated here as rubbish, is *ashpah*, and in the poem it is near the gate. This is a thinly veiled reference to what is known in Hebrew as *Sha'ar haAshpot*, or in English, Dung Gate, the gate to the old city of Jerusalem which is closest to the Western Wall.

Amichai is referring to a well-known essay by Berl Katznelson. In 1934, the youth leadership of the Labor movement scheduled its annual conference on *Tisha beAv*, even though the formal policy of the Histadrut was to be closed on that day in recognition of it being a day of mourning. The youth who felt no need to mourn the destruction of the Temple had no hesitation disregarding this policy. In response Katznelson penned an essay about remembering and forgetting. He writes:

*Human beings are endowed with two
faculties, memory and forgetfulness.
We cannot live without both. Were only
memory to exist, then we would be
crushed under its burden. And were we*

ruled entirely by forgetfulness, what place would there be for our rich heritage ... A renewing and creative generation does not throw the cultural birthright into the dustbin. It examines and scrutinizes, accepts and rejects. At times it may keep and add to an existing tradition. At times it goes to the junk pile to excavate and remove the rust from that which had lain in forgetfulness, in order to resuscitate old traditions which have the power to stimulate the spirit of the generation of renewal...

Amichai's poem dramatizes that just as commemorations cannot remember for us, the *ashpah*, the rubbish pit or dung heap of Jewish history, cannot remember for us, but the *ashpah* can be mined and excavated to uncover the things which help us create personal memory. Referencing Katznelson, instead of ignoring the junk pile, we must be prepared to access our discarded and uncomfortable narratives and refurbish them to incorporate them into our personal memory.

How do we choose from the thousands of stories, from the millions of facts? How do we mediate Holocaust history for our students? By keeping the focus on memory. We need to identify those elements which will be helpful in cultivating meaningful memory. As Michael Weingrad writes in *Jewish Review of Books*: "History, because of its rigorous fidelity to the totality of the recorded past, cannot tell stories about or draw lessons from it. It is memory—willful, partial, and selective—that makes meaning from the past and allows us to find our way in the present."

Memory requires a cogent and meaningful narrative. That narrative needs to have the

input of both the previous generation and of the new generation, as it is the new generation who will have to carry that memory, internalize it, and pass it forward. The narrative itself must be relevant to the new generation, and it is the task of both generations to discover and create it. We remember what is important to us and what we create—and forget the rest. And the narrative must touch not only the intellect but the soul. Emotional memories become seared into our psyche in ways which intellectual ones cannot.

Creating Memory, which I created in partnership with The Lookstein Center, is a free arts-based initiative intended to help young people encounter the Holocaust in an active, personal, and meaningful way. Participants are exposed to poetry and texts which express universally relatable themes from the Holocaust such as family and belonging, memory and silence, place and displacement, faith and hope. These themes are relevant across cultures and across generations, enabling access to the emotional impact of the Holocaust, not only its historical manifestations. Students are guided to channel these emotions into a creative outlet that allows them to feel a part of the Holocaust narrative, one which they are joining via their creativity. The active participation of the coming generations in voicing their own form of Holocaust remembrance ensures that Holocaust remembrance stays vibrant and relevant with the passage of the years.

THE ART OF TEACHING WITH ARTIFACTS:

AN INTERVIEW WITH YONI KADDEN



Yoni Kadden joined the faculty of Gann Academy in 2000. His students have developed numerous artifact-centered public history projects including a nationally recognized museum of disability history, a published Yizkor Book of a community buried anonymously in a local cemetery, and the production of a play based on original letters from the Shoah. He has also designed and led place-based explorations for both students and educators including Civil Rights journeys to Alabama and a politics deep-dive in Washington, DC.

Your office is like a mini-museum. How did you get started with artifacts?

I had an aunt and uncle in Atlanta; their home was filled with antiques—even mundane things like a laundry detergent bucket from the 1940s. It was just something that I found deeply resonant. I’m deeply interested in material culture; it transports me to a different time. When my mother and I were cleaning out my grandmother’s house after she passed away, we came across this envelope that my mother, when she was a kid, received from cousins who lived in Alabama. Attached to the letter inside was a Confederate \$5 bill, with a paperclip rusted on the bill itself. That was so exciting; I had a personal connection to the civil war. Shortly after that I learned that when Lincoln was assassinated, he had a Confederate \$5 bill in his wallet. That cemented it for me. It made me feel connected to a particular moment in time, but also to a particular person—I shared something with President Lincoln.

Let me tell you how this affects my students. When we’re studying the antebellum period, we deep dive into abolitionist literature. One of the primary sources that we look at is *The Liberator*, which was a newspaper put out by William Lloyd Garrison here in the Boston area. We talk about it, we read a few articles, look at the masthead, and discuss why he took the particular approach to abolitionism that he did. And then I pull down off the wall an original copy of *The Liberator* which has been hanging there all along. It blows their mind. Even though they can’t actually touch it because it’s behind glass, they want to put their hands even on that frame. This emotional connection is palpably different than the intellectual discussion we’d just had about the newspaper and even the person behind it. To quote **Ken Burns**, “emotion is the glue of memory.”

One last quick story: Last summer, my family and I went to Philadelphia and visited the space where Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, in an apartment building, not too far from Independence Hall. The ranger told us a couple of stories helping to bring Jefferson’s story to life. My daughter, who was about ten at the time, particularly loves this kind of stuff and started asking more questions. “Is that the desk where he wrote it at?” “Well, no, but it’s a pretty good replica of the desk.” “Is this his bed?” “Well, no, it’s a period bed, but there are a couple of artifacts

we know belonged to Jefferson.” And then finally she asked, “Is this the actual house? Is this the actual apartment?” “No, they tore down the building and rebuilt it in the 1970s according to the blueprints and specifications described in letters that we have. We’re sure that this is what it would have looked like.” That was it; she was done. Reproductions and facsimiles don’t do it for her; she wanted the real thing. Her interest disappeared when she lost the possibility of that emotional bridge to a faraway time.

What do the students do with artifacts that you bring in?

There are two paths. One is the emotional one, which I just mentioned. But not everyone is going to have that nerdy historical connection like I had to a 1940s detergent bucket.

The other path is an intellectual one, where students begin to interrogate an artifact—usually a mundane one—which is really exciting. I have a 1920s washing machine, for example. It’s the size of a lobster pot with a little machine on top. I’ll put it on the table, have them all look around and then we start with the most important part, the questions, using what’s called the QFT, **Question Formulation Technique**. They ask questions, and every question gets recorded as asked. They’ll ask about the shape, the color, the knobs, the patent plaque, everything. They get curious. Then they categorize their questions, and afterwards they get to research their questions. They begin to discover all sorts of things—about the company that made it, when it was introduced, why it was invented, how it was advertised, how it changed people’s lives, and so much more. And here they have a tangible piece of that entire era—of historical change—in their hands; it becomes something sacred.

Just imagine that you had just studied a piece of text with commentary and then you broke it out in original parchment from, I don’t know, the 6th century. How do you think your students would react? It would probably change the emotional valence of that particular moment.

What role does imagination play in all of this?

That’s a great question.

Undoubtedly there’s something about imagination that is clicking in when you begin to appreciate an object and begin to feel connected to its time and space.

This is something I struggle with because it’s a little bit at odds with the historical thinking enterprise that I so deeply believe in and really want to emphasize with my students. Historical thinking is really all about grounding yourself in the texts and the evidence of what you know, contextualizing yourself in a moment in a factual way, and not taking liberties with it or going beyond what we know. By contrast, the act of imagination puts you in a space that may not have existed. Whenever I take my students to a place, I’m worried that they’re now imagining themselves historically inaccurately. But at some point I got over that. I realized that, in the end, I have two goals. I want them to be intellectually solid in the way they approach history. In our world today there are way too many people rewriting history for their own purposes, without being grounded in anything historically accurate. That’s really problematic. I want my students to be historical thinkers, grounded in evidence. But I also want them to love history. I want them to fall in love with stories of the past, to feel connected to their past. I want them to feel part of the human community, both in terms of space and over time. I want them to feel part of this human experiment that we are living

in on this planet and to feel connected to that larger chain of humanity over time. That's an incredibly powerful thing. That leads to both a sense of humility and responsibility.

So yes, I also want my students to feel. It's that emotional piece, including the imagination, that can really connect you to the past. I know that it's fraught, but it's really important.

You're a teacher of American History. Would you imagine Jewish History as similar, or would there be differences?

It's tricky, and it's a question I debate all the time. This is a journey for me, and here's where I stand now. On the one hand, if we treat Jewish History differently than any other subject of history we are belittling, infantilizing, and even dishonoring Jewish History. I dread the thought of treating Jewish History as something less than the great pursuit of using our historical thinking skills to try to make sense in a very complex, high-level way, of what happened in our past. So, for example, if I were teaching American Jewish History, I might take an advertisement from the OU in 1924 and interrogate it. How it was a unique product of the American Jewish scene. These are all historical thinking skills.

At the same time, I want students to feel a connectedness to the people that they are studying. I want them to feel like they are sitting there in 1924, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, thinking about how Jews were strategizing how to maximize the Jewish community and also how to help Jews keep kosher and whether or not a rabbinic stamp of approval should be used for commercial purposes. I want my students to both understand and to feel that moment.

When I think of myself as Jew, I immediately go back to the 18th century; I think of myself as

a Vilna Jew, even though most of the family Jewish story I grew up with is not from Vilna. It's because of what I connected to in so much of my school learning and shul experiences. It wasn't brought about by historical thinking, but by a sense of connectedness to the Jewish history probably learned in places like my eighth-grade rebbe-hagiography class. And that's powerful. I don't think that I would call it Jewish History, I would call it Jewish memory. Primary sources and artifacts ground you in the history, but the imagination moves us into memory.

It's like holding that newspaper, *The Liberator*. We don't really know what the Garrison's office actually looked like in 1840, but I imagine myself standing there with this piece of paper which has just been printed. That's incredibly powerful and moving to me. Is that history? Probably not. But is that important? I think it really is.

I resisted this for a long time. I was afraid that I was compromising my intellectual truth, or doing a disservice to my historical endeavor, or being disingenuous as a history teacher. I'm a history teacher, not a teacher of creative writing. But then I started thinking more about the larger endeavor about connecting us to the past. And that's where artifacts come in. That's where we really connect. Why are we connecting ourselves to the past in this way? We could just do it intellectually. So I think that it is important, and for sure in Jewish history as well. Balancing the historical thinking and skills with a sense of building memory. And that's where imagination plays a great role.

Can you talk about the process a little? Kids ask questions to which you don't necessarily have the answers. Is that scary?

I love that question. I'll just speak to my own fundamental beliefs about what I'm doing in

the classroom. I'm here as a fellow explorer, not to provide answers for them. I'm here to help them learn to ask questions, to become great questioners. When they're writing a paper, the part I care most about is that initial phase, the iterative figuring out exactly what the right question is. Nothing excites me more than when I've come up with my own question for the day and then some student opens the class with a different question, something I hadn't thought of—and it's invariably so much better than mine. I'll make the switch immediately; that new question will become the topic for the day, because the purpose of history is to notice things and ask questions about those things. I'm not a historian by training; I am a teacher of history. My job is to help students to learn to ask good questions and helping them learn to explore and find good answers—and good answers aren't immediate, they take time.

It's not scary because I don't believe my goal is to provide answers and things to memorize for them. My goal is for them to become historical thinkers and this is what accomplishes that. My goal is to help them feel a passion for their part, a bond with their history. Getting them there is exciting and invigorating.

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THE PROMISE OF JEWISH HISTORY

Rick Schindelheim

What if you could teach a subject that grapples with the most important issues facing Judaism today? What if you could teach a subject that offers students more growth in Jewish literacy per class period than any other? What if you could teach a subject that bridges the gap between your students and Jews throughout space and time? What if you could teach a subject that provides your students with wisdom from the past, gratitude for the present, and inspiration for the future? This is the promise of Jewish History.

Jewish History need not be a dry exercise in rote learning of dates and old names—it can be one of the most impactful, interesting, and meaningful classes that we teach. I will attempt to demonstrate this by referencing one of the Jewish History courses we teach at the Fuchs Mizrahi High School as a paradigm of such an approach.

The course is driven by the idea that “Understanding Jewish history can enrich, inspire, and inform our engagement in Jewish life and the Jewish community.” There are three major units of study, each of which is guided by an essential question and big ideas. Chronologically, the course moves from within the Classical period all the way to the Modern period of Jewish history, but the units are organized based on theme rather than chronology. This thematic organization allows for more coherence and development of each idea, as I will demonstrate below.

Responding to Persecution

The first unit addresses Jewish responses to persecution throughout the ages. By casting Jews as subjects in their own story who actively responded to their experiences, the curriculum steers away from a “**lachrymose conception of Jewish history**” while making no attempt to hide the inescapable historical reality of Jewish suffering. Topics addressed in this unit include (but are not limited to) Jewish oppression at the hands of the Seleucid Greeks; the Roman persecutions in the first and second centuries CE; Jewish suffering in medieval Ashkenaz including crusader massacres, blood libels, and anti-Jewish artwork; persecutions in medieval Christian Spain including the phenomenon of forced Disputations, the Spanish Inquisition, and the 1492 expulsion; the Jews’ “Dhimmi” status and other tensions under Islamic rule; and the Khmelnitzky Massacres of 1648-1649.

As we study each example of persecution we ask, “How did the Jews respond?” In each lesson we see examples of one, two, or three of the following: a) Maintaining and expressing hope and



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faith in God and the Jewish future; b) Actively commemorating and memorializing the loss (especially through liturgy); c) Identifying sources of meaning and inspiration in light of the suffering. At the end of the unit, students create a webpage that memorializes a particular persecution. They outline examples of the types of responses we've studied and create their own responses following the model of "faith, commemoration, and meaning."

In addition to presenting a framework for how to respond to contemporary antisemitism—which, disturbingly, is more relevant than it should be—the study of the past two millennia of Jewish persecutions offers several other important benefits. First, the material is saturated with opportunities to enhance Jewish literacy. As we move from one key center of Jewish life to another, we meet crucial figures such as R. Akiva, Bar Kokhba, Maimonides, Nahmanides, and R. Meir of Rothenberg. Their lives and experiences are framed in ways that shed light on contemporary Jewish life, not simply memorized without context. Reciting Hallel on Yom Yerushalayim can be an eminently profound experience for one who knows that the Jewish people last controlled Jerusalem in 70 CE and that our attempt to recapture it in the Bar Kokhba Revolt resulted in the brutal Hadrianic persecutions and the martyrdom of many great sages. This background framing impacts on contemporary Jewish experience, sweetening the celebrations and transforming the mourning events (like the fast days) into meaningful moments.

Understanding the history of Jewish persecutions can also enhance our students' experience of regular Jewish life in the twenty-first century. I often assign my students a journal writing exercise that requires them

to write from two perspectives. The first asks them to place themselves in the mind of an individual living during the event we are studying, for example, as a witness to the burning of 24 cartloads of Jewish books perpetrated after the Paris Disputation of 1242. After using their writing to empathize with a Jew living 800 years ago on a different continent, I ask them to return to the present moment and write from their own perspective and to reflect upon the freedom and safety they enjoy in America and how unique such an experience is. I ask them to consider the existence of the State of Israel and how privileged we are to witness a reality that our ancestors could only dream of. With all this in mind, I ask them to think seriously about the responsibility such circumstances place upon them. As Solomon Grayzel writes in [A History of the Jews](#), "Jewish history presents a challenge to the modern Jew. The heroes of the Jewish past...Their life and effort were wasted unless they lead to action on our part, to defend what we received from the past and, if possible, to enrich it further." We cannot appreciate the Jewish present and we will not inspire the Jewish future without an intimate knowledge of the Jewish past.

Rabbinic Authority, Halakha, and Torah Study

Moving beyond a history of persecution, the second major unit in the course deals with Judaism's survival in exile: Rabbinic authority, the role of *halakha*, and the centrality of Torah study in Jewish life. This unit highlights the texts, personalities, and ideas that have guided, animated, and sustained Judaism since the destruction of the Second Temple. We first deal with how Judaism responded to the loss of national autonomy and Temple service by placing a greater emphasis on

Torah study and a meticulous observance of *halakha* (what we call the “Holy Shift”).

This shift introduces a survey of Rabbinic literature—the *Tannaim* and the Mishnah, the *Amoraim* and the Gemara, the *Geonim* and responsa literature, the classical medieval luminaries and their works, and finally R. Yosef Karo and the *Shulhan Arukh*. The focus on Rabbinic literature invites an exploration of the critique of the Rabbinic enterprise. We meet the Karaites in medieval Baghdad and discuss their questions on the origin and authority of the Oral Law as well as the Rabbinic responses to these challenges and the early Christian criticisms of the Pharisaic tendency to overemphasize the letter of the law at the expense of the spirit. This includes readings from modern thinkers like Rabbi Soloveitchik, who make the case for a passionate and spirited yet scrupulous observance of traditional *halakha*. Finally, the unit concludes with an examination of the most recent Pew Research on American Jews and the story it tells regarding the correlation between halakhic observance and Jewish continuity. The historical framing contributes greatly to contemporary questions students ask such as, “Why should I care what some rabbis said thousands of years ago? And why does Judaism care so much about details? Why can’t we just be good people?”

Israel and the Nations: Isolation or Integration?

The third unit opens the critical questions of the relationship between Jews and their host cultures. To what extent should Jews embrace or reject the ideas and values of their surrounding society? What are the risks and potential benefits of integration with the broader culture versus isolating ourselves from it? Opposing responses to this question

are explored in a variety of eras and locales—the Talmudic era, Geonic literature, medieval Ashkenaz and the Golden Age of Spain, the Maimonidean controversy, and finally with an introduction to Jewish responses to the Enlightenment in the 18th through 20th centuries. While studying this content, students are challenged to understand and articulate the strengths of both sides of the isolation vs. integration dialectic. They gain a deeper appreciation for the worldview of their own community as well as the views of communities that take different stances on this issue, all leading to learning which is core to contemporary Jewish life.

Jewish History is for All Jews

While the specifics I shared above were developed for our school, a modern-Orthodox high school with specific ideological goals, the underlying principle of teaching Jewish history to provide students with foundations and grounding for constructing their identities can be adapted to other schools with different ideologies. The specific examples as well as the direction of the exploration can change, but the core knowledge will see significant overlap. Jewish History then becomes a framework for engaged Jewish life and provides an extraordinary opportunity to generate meaningful dialogue and greater understanding among Jews of different orientations.

Jewish History is inspiring. It promotes a sense of Jewish pride. It generates reflection on a personal level and unites us on a national level. Jewish history explains how we got to where we are and helps to guide our path forward. As one of the most powerful tools in our educational arsenal, we’d be wise to use it well.

AN ADAPTABLE JEWISH HISTORY CURRICULUM

Menachem Hecht

Menachem Hecht is Jewish History Department Chair and Director of Israel Education at YULA High School. Rabbi Dr. Hecht lives in Los Angeles, CA with his wife and children, and engages in consulting and woodworking in his spare time.



The study of Jewish History builds Jewish pride, purpose, and belonging in students. Exploration of our 4,000-year past helps students develop into confident and empowered Jews who live with faith and commitment in the modern world. In principle, many Jewish day school leaders would agree that Jewish History ought to have a primary place in Jewish day school education, but they often find no easy path to develop an appropriate Jewish History program. Textbooks are rare, experienced Jewish History teachers are hard to find, and the dearth of resources makes it impractical to train novice teachers.

I suggest a framework to help develop a set of flexible and adaptable resources that might enable Jewish History education to flourish in a wide range of Jewish day school settings.

A Variety of Needs

Consider a few Jewish day schools interested in offering Jewish History programs:

School A wishes to integrate Jewish History into its History curriculum by dedicating 4 history class periods per quarter to a related topic in Jewish History each year.

16 periods per year, 48 total class periods over 3 years

School B is thinking about offering a weekly Jewish History elective to its seniors.

36 total class periods

School C is interested in offering a pair of one semester, 4x per week, Jewish History electives to its juniors.

72 class periods per semester, 144 total class periods

School D is prepared to dedicate core scheduling time to Jewish History. Students would have the opportunity to study Jewish History 3x a week for 3 years of high school.

108 class periods annually, 324 total class periods over 3 years

The variability in approaches to Jewish History education across Jewish day schools introduces a unique challenge apart from the typical challenges associated with curriculum development in the humanities. Can a single set of resources meet the needs of the wide variety of ways in which Jewish day schools seek to teach Jewish History?

An Adaptable Model

A Jewish History curriculum built as a series of self-contained but linked modules would offer a combination of rigor and flexibility to address the wide range of needs of each of the schools above.

- The basic structure of a modular curriculum is a 4-class period mini-unit designed to stand on its own as a self-contained learning experience.
- Each mini-unit, in addition to standing on its own, is designed to stack together with 2-3 other linked “mini-units” to form a full unit. A full unit, including 4 linked “mini-units” and two additional class periods for review and assessment, would take up approximately 18 total class periods.
- Each full unit, in addition to standing on its own, is designed to be stacked alongside 3 other full units to comprise a course of Jewish History learning.

Using this modular curricular structure, School A can select among **mini-units** to find just the right 4 period mini-unit to complement its History curriculum each quarter. School B can choose 2 **full units** and spread them out

over the course of a year in a weekly class. School C can build semester-long **course** electives out of sets of 4 linked units. And School D can offer a full 3-year trajectory comprising 8 Jewish History units per year, covering 24 full units of Jewish History over the course of students’ high school experience.

Class periods immerse students in a historical moment

So much for logistics. What about narrative, message, and meaning? What actually happens inside each of these units?

Like humanities education more broadly, Jewish History education thrives on student curiosity, student exploration, and student analysis. Best practices in history education immediately transfer to success in Jewish History education. Excellent units begin by exploring student curiosity and prior knowledge on the subject. Excellent units end with meaningful assessments designed to challenge students to engage creatively, personally, and rigorously with historical material.

The core of each unit is a set of fascinating class periods built around active student exploration and analysis of primary sources along with vibrant classroom discussion and debate. Teachers provide contextual framing for primary sources, while students engage directly with the sources, immersing in the historical moment and making sense of the past for themselves. Along with the development of reading skills and analytic and critical thinking skills, students develop a deep sense of personal connection and value for the Jewish past when they have the opportunity to dig into it themselves.

Mini-units explore episodes

4,000 years provides the Jewish people with plenty of stories. Given limited time and resources and the competition for attention which is central to any contemporary educational effort, the first priority is to grab students' attention. Here is a basic rubric worth considering in evaluating which episodes of Jewish History to incorporate into mini-units.

- **Excitement:** Compelling episodes tend to be story-driven, to feature dynamic characters, and to contain elements of surprise.
- **Relevance:** Compelling episodes offer the potential for providing context for contemporary Jewish opportunities and challenges.
- **Resources:** Compelling episodes are loaded with primary sources that allow students to dive into the story themselves. And they are backed by secondary sources that provide plenty of background and context for teachers to be well-prepared.

Hundreds of episodes might fit the bill. Here are ten:

1. The Hasmonean dynasty and the Jewish encounter with Greek culture and power
2. Saadia Gaon and the ups & downs of the Jewish experience under early Islam
3. Yehuda Halevi and the world of medieval Hebrew poetry
4. Shabbetai Zvi and 17th century messianism
5. Gluckel of Hameln and the world of women in the *kehilla*
6. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov and the world of *Hasidut* in the late 18th century
7. Moses Mendelssohn and the *Haskala* efforts to “modernize” the *kehilla* world
8. Anya Yezierska and the early 20th century American Jewish immigrant experience
9. Rav Kook and the Old Yishuv/New Yishuv tensions in the early 20th century
10. Abba Kovner and Jewish resistance in the Holocaust

Full units develop themes

For the sake of illustration, consider one theoretical full unit: “**Europe, America, Palestine**” (1880-1920). This unit might be comprised of 3 mini-units:

- **Go to Palestine:** Disillusionment with both the traditional religious world and the promise of Enlightenment & Emancipation left a group of brilliant creative Jews seeking something new. They landed on Jewish nationalism.

Mini-units break down to 3-4 class periods. This mini-unit might include a class on the rise of modern Jew hatred in “Enlightened” capitals of Europe in the late 1800s; a class on the rise of “practical Zionism” in Eastern Europe; and a class on the rise of “political Zionism” in Western Europe.

- **Go to America:** Prospective immigrants had certain assumptions about what America held in store for them. The America they found upon arrival was a more complicated place.

This mini-unit might include a class on the glorified depictions of America circulating among Eastern European Jews in the late 1800s; a class on the systems of mutual support and integration developed by Jewish immigrants in America at this time; and a class on the persistent antisemitism that American Jews continued to face in the first few decades of the 20th century.

- **Stay Where You Are:** Two opposing groups remained committed to Europe: Reform Jews who believed that “Berlin is Jerusalem,” and Orthodox Jews who felt the physical dangers they knew were outweighed by the spiritual dangers they didn’t.

This mini-unit might include a class on the refiguring of messianic thinking in progressive Jewish denominations in this period; a class on the positions of Orthodox leaders in Europe who discouraged their community members from joining both the nascent Zionist movement and the flood of American immigrants; and a couple of classes comparing the situations of Jews in communities in Iran, North Africa, and the Middle East in the early 20th century.

Major thematic questions to explore in this unit might include:

- **Galut/Geula:** How do Jews think about and experience diaspora/exile/*galut* on the one hand vs. homeland/redemption/*geula* on the other?
- **Contingency:** History can seem obvious in retrospect. What is gained by going beyond looking at the past with hindsight to instead consider the challenges of decision-making within a historical moment?
- **Tradition/Modernity:** What are the various ways in which individual Jews and Jewish communities balance and negotiate among “modern” and “traditional” sets of values and ways of life?

Courses enable big picture thinking

A full unit offers a great deal of stand-alone value. But students really begin to develop a sense of the scope of Jewish History—and the attendant ability to think both subtly and broadly about Jewish identity and community—when full units get stacked alongside each other to create courses. Consider a few options for building the “Europe, America, Palestine” unit above into a course:

- Stack the “Europe, America, Palestine” unit with a *Hasidut* unit, a *Haskala* unit, a Zionism Unit, and a Holocaust unit and you get a Modern Jewish History course.
- Stack the “Europe, America, Palestine” unit with a unit on Modern Antisemitism, a unit on

Pre-War Europe, and a unit on Nazi Germany, and a World War II unit and you get a Holocaust course.

- Stack the “Europe, America, Palestine” unit with a unit on the Rise of Zionism, a unit on Building the State of Israel, a Religious Zionism unit, and a unit on the Arab-Israeli Conflict and you have a Zionism course.

Each of these courses opens up the space for creative exploration and discussion of big picture thematic thinking on the same kinds of questions brought up in the “Europe, America, Palestine” unit itself: What does it mean to live in *galut* vs. *geula*? What does it mean to be a modern Jew? How do we make sense of our lives and communities in the context of the web of our historical experiences?

Next Steps

I want to close by noting that this modular model for Jewish history education is not purely theoretical. As an educational consultant and as Jewish History Department Chair at YULA High School in Los Angeles, I have worked with teachers and administrators to develop and successfully implement a wide range of Jewish History offerings. All have been built out of this modular system, allowing a combination of rigor and flexibility that works within any given set of scheduling and resource limitations while enabling deep student engagement and meaningful learning and growth.

I believe Jewish History education is among the most powerful tools available to Jewish school leaders and teachers in our work of building resilient, robust, and dynamic Jewish identity and Jewish community, and I hope the ideas laid out in this proposal spur efforts to make excellent programs in Jewish History education more widely available in the Jewish day school world.



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Libraries are not only places where books live—they are where manuscripts, documents, maps, recordings, and other items of significance can come alive. The National Library of Israel has an amazing trove of resources with unique national, historic, and cultural significance for the Jewish people—many of which are available on [The National Library of Israel for Educators website](#). The website is filled with curated resources, including [lesson plans](#), [digital activities](#), [webinars](#), materials about the Jewish calendar, [Israel](#) and [more](#). In this video, you will be introduced to four key steps of learning with primary sources, from initial observations to finding personal connection and meaning and even creating something new. You will learn how to access these resources from anywhere in the world and, more importantly, you will get a sense of how to use them as interactive artifacts for students to explore learning Jewish History.



PERMISSION TO BE ME:

SUPPORTING STUDENTS' JEWISH IDENTITY THROUGH JEWISH HISTORY EDUCATION

Sara Karesh Coxe



Sara Karesh Coxe teaches high school Jewish History at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School (Rockville, MD). Trained at JTS and UC, Santa Barbara in the study of religion, Dr. Coxe teaches Ancient and Medieval Jewish History, Modern Jewish History, and Comparative Religion.

In almost every era, the Jewish people have struggled with how to best blend Jewish culture with the majority culture. By using this history as a model, my colleagues and I strive to create experiences for our high school students that give them tools to develop their own Jewish identity. We do not teach students what that Jewish identity is, rather we guide them to find their own way as they grow into curious and independent Jewish adults. We focus on exploring the choices and experiences of Jews from the past so that our students see themselves in both the continuity of Jewish life and in the changes that Jews have made to their identity as Jews and to Judaism itself over time.

Over the course of eighteen years in the classroom, my students taught me that they need more than the Jewish historical record. Even when I have convinced them that evidence is important, they need to know why they should care about Jewish history and collective memory in their contemporary world. Exploring Jewish history and collective memory in the classroom grants students the permission to see diversity, to choose which variety of Judaism they connect with, and to build their own, individual Jewish identities as they grow toward adulthood. In the university setting, “doing history” requires rigorous analysis of primary and secondary materials, alongside an examination of assumptions, legends, and traditions so as not to assign historical value to ideas and events without evidence. In contrast, the high school classroom makes it possible to discuss those assumptions, legends, and traditions on a personal level and outside the scope of the social sciences. In doing so, the Jewish day school classroom becomes an integrated exploration of academic Jewish history, context, collective memory, and identity. Hence, “doing Jewish history” in a day school means that students learn about Jews in the past and the present, developing a sense of the difference between collective memory and history. This all contributes to the evolution of their individual Jewish identity.

Here I offer three examples of lessons that encourage students to think about different expressions of Judaism and Jewish life in the ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Once students understand the context, it is then possible to talk with them about collective memory, making connections to Jewish choices in the past and in the present. Each of these lessons offers rigorous historical study alongside an exploration of how Jews both reinforced collective memory

through ritual, and at other times, layered this memory with change.

Our students begin their study of ancient Jewish History with the destruction of Solomon's Temple and the Babylonian exile. We discuss how history can be made sacred through the establishment of holidays such as Tisha BeAv, the Fast of Gedalia, and Hanuka around the memory of historical events, after which we head directly into figuring out what Jewish life was like during the first Babylonian exile.

Students then embark on an "archeological dig" in Iraq (ancient Babylonia) by creating artifacts that reflect something specific about Jewish life in the Babylonian exile. Each student must unpack what Jewish life looked like in that time period by studying biblical texts, reading scholarly excerpts, and viewing the "Jerusalem in Babylonia" virtual exhibit at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem. Then they construct an artifact that could possibly be found in an archeological dig. After learning from experts in the field of ancient history, the students apply what they now know about Jews in the Babylonian exile to an object, reinforcing their sense that these people had real lives and experienced some of the same challenges that we do today.

Students express surprise when they discover that there is no historical evidence that the Jews suffered in the Babylonian exile once they settled into their lives there. In fact, as students read the sources, they see that the Jews in Babylonia, like their own families, grappled both with how to mix a majority culture (in this case Babylonian culture) with Jewish culture while maintaining their own distinct identity. For example, they notice that while some Jews in Babylonia had Babylonian names others had Jewish names. In a one-page essay or explanation of

their artifact, students are able to identify this phenomenon as acculturation or assimilation as well as internalize the idea that there are many ways that Jews expressed Jewish identity even in the ancient world. This is a theme that will occur over and over again as we encounter the Maccabees, the Sektarians of the first century CE, the Jews of Spain, and the classical reformers in the modern period, among others.

Muslim Spain provides the subject matter for a second opportunity to connect the Jewish past with the Jewish present, thereby impacting students' ability to express their own Jewish identity as well as giving them the permission to do so. Students learn about parties in the streets of Andalusia, cultural exchanges of literature and art in the form of Arabic and Hebrew poetry, and illuminated manuscripts. Through each of these examples, the students come to understand that a Jew in diverse places and times maintained Jewish tradition by expressing Jewish values, such as love of learning, mutual benevolence, and halakhic observance. Personalities such as Hasdai ibn Shaprut, Isaac ben Jacob Alfasi, Samuel ibn Nagrela, and Yehuda Halevi are highlighted by learning about their successes in Muslim society, their learning, and their benevolence toward their own Jewish community. Students internalize these ideas by producing short skits in which they must apply what they learned as they internalize the idea that just as the combination of Arab and Jewish culture was not necessarily problematic in the Jewish world of Muslim Spain, the blending of the majority culture with Jewish culture in their lives need not be problematic.

In addition to these examples of ancient and medieval Jewish history, the modern period offers numerous opportunities to

deliberately weave more recent perspectives into the consciousness of our Jewish teens. Students study primary and secondary material about developing Jewish ideologies in Germany during the 19th century, including the Hamburg Temple and other early grassroots religious reforms. We assign each student a denomination and facilitate a simulation during which students speak in the first person from their historical perspective. In preparation for this, students must write a character study, complete with children, careers, and Jewish practices, that apply their knowledge of what would be historically accurate for members of the assigned denomination. This prepares the students for their final challenge in the unit—to construct a school, ideologically and practically, through discussions about what will be taught, who will do the teaching, how students and faculty will pray, what kind of food will be served, and other issues that highlight the diversity of 19th-century Jewish thought ranging from Neo-Orthodoxy to *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (which the students readily identify as the precursor to their Jewish History classes!). Through this simulation, students realize that bringing together different expressions of Judaism is challenging and sometimes impossible, yet we continue to do it today as others did in the past.

These are just three examples from which students recognize and experience historical models of Jewish life, and there are many others. Study of Jewish life in Bordeaux, the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, or Recife provides exposure to the men and women (thank you, Dona Gracia Mendes!) of both the Sephardic and Ashkenazic Diasporas, revealing how Jews successfully acculturated, blending the majority culture and maintaining a distinct minority culture. This grants our students the permission to identify themselves as valid members of the Jewish community without restricting their primary identifier to halakhic observance.

Today's high school students live in a multicultural society, especially those who live in or near a metropolitan area, yet each individual develops their own identity from their own individual experiences. The historical lens helps them to understand that change over time is a constant in Jewish life, that they are not the only Jews to make choices that might conflict with and/or complement Jewish experiences, and that their own experiences as Jews are as genuine as those who lived before them.



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TEACHING JEWISH HISTORIES:

BROADENING THE SCOPE OF THE JEWISH WORLD

Daniel Rosenthal

When students whose families come from the Jewish communities of North Africa, Central and East Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East enter our schools, are they able to find and situate themselves within the Jewish history that we teach? Do students from Ashkenazi backgrounds find ways to place their families within these broader, more diverse narratives of Jewish history?



Daniel Rosenthal joined the Jewish History faculty at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in 2015 after receiving his Ph.D. in History and Jewish Studies in 2014 from the University of Toronto. Previously, Dr. Rosenthal taught at the University of Haifa, the University of Toronto, and the University of Western Ontario.

The focus of Jewish history in North America has long used the two poles of Israel/Zionism and the Holocaust as the sources of communal identity and as justification for the need for a cohesive collective identity and memory. This focus was seen as a bulwark against the loosening of Jewish selfhood within the western cultural context. This approach, however, has served to alienate many members of the broader Jewish community who do not see themselves or their families represented within the narratives that have prioritized and privileged the Ashkenazi experience. Even in Israel, where today a majority of the Jewish population has some roots in the Mizrahi world, the Ashkenazi narrative is still dominant as a means of explaining how the modern state came into existence.

Over the past few years, the Jewish History curriculum at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School (Rockville, MD) has aimed to find an approach that allows all our students to find themselves within the diverse and overlapping narratives of Jewish history. Rather than simply broadening the focus on specific populations—whether Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, Ethiopian, or otherwise—it has become clear that there is a need for a history that weaves together the diversity of the Jewish experience and explores how Jewish cultures and histories have come into contact and conflict.

One course we are developing uses the question of Jewish food to show the interactions between cultures and how different Jewish populations influence one another through their gastronomic practices across Jewish history. Food is an ideal focus for understanding these types of cross-cultural processes. Moreover, food throws open a window on the gender dynamics of the Jewish family; the Shabbat table lays bare how the roles of men and women have historically shaped the Jewish home.

Students can see how their family's customs fit into the history of Jewish foods while also

learning how the contemporary Jewish food scene has become a literal melting pot—the members of my household, for instance, have become devotees of the za’atar bagel. But this food scene, especially in Israel, has also had the ability to highlight Jewish cultures that have often been marginalized from traditional North American and Israeli Jewish narratives. One need only think of the entrance of *jahnun* and *shakshouka* into the mainstream to see how pieces of Mizrahi and Maghrebi cultures have found a place at the table. This process ultimately allows students to gain a better understanding of how diverse identities and experiences negotiate influence over what it means to be Jewish and to have a shared history.

This approach to Jewish history pedagogy has also necessitated a rethink of our existing curricula. Our year-long course on modern Jewish History aims to help students situate themselves and their families within the history that we cover. As they see themselves and their own families in the narratives, students get excited to learn about how major events and historical trends shaped them. The final unit of the year, American Jewish History, is capped off by a final project on changes in religious practice among succeeding generations of the student’s own family, and how those changes relate to the generational relationship with the United States.

To contrast the educational shift, in the past, the project relied heavily on Will Herberg’s classic 1955 study [Protestant-Catholic-Jew](#) to provide a theoretical framework for helping students understand the process of integration and cultural retention among progressive generations of immigrants to the United States. While his study was compelling for many students whose Ashkenazi

backgrounds fit the paradigm of families that arrived between 1881 and 1924, other students would find themselves lost. This disconnect was all the more profound when the student was themselves a first-generation immigrant.

It remains difficult for our students who do not fall into this Ashkenazi framework to find materials that can help situate their own family’s journey into the American Jewish story. The most readily available resources still highlight the Ashkenazi experience; any research query on Jewish immigration to the United States will produce results that almost exclusively focus on the period before the 1950s. Newer organizations like [JIMENA](#) (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa) have started the work necessary to help provide background on the history of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewish communities in the United States, but this work is ongoing and a challenge for students to access.

This rethink is all the more necessary given the publication of [Jewish Americans in 2020](#), a demographic study of the American Jewish population by the Pew Research Center. The study found that the Jewish population in the United States is growing increasingly diverse, both in terms of family origins and how they self-identify. Pew’s report found that while 97% of American Jews aged fifty and older defined themselves as “White (non-Hispanic),” that number dropped to 85% for respondents under age thirty, and nearly one-third of American-Jewish adults surveyed are first or second-generation immigrants to the United States, with a growing number coming from the Middle East and North Africa.

Expanding the range of Jewish histories studied benefits not only the more recent immigrant students but broadens the

perspective of the Ashkenazi ones as well. While the history of Jewish migration from Europe to the United States is certainly a key part of the broader narratives of American Jewish history, it is an ongoing story. The emigration of Jews from the territories of the former Soviet Union over the last fifty years provides a means to understand how to expand the history of Ashkenazi immigration beyond the crucial decades at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.

Given the challenges of source material, it has been most valuable to turn to oral histories to fill in these gaps in the narratives of Jews living in the United States. When students get to highlight their family origins and assess the nature of the decisions about migration—whether made in previous generations or even by the students themselves—they can identify points of continuity and rupture within the processes of immigration and integration. The oral histories themselves can also add to the growing body of literature on how American Jewish narratives form, overlap, and diverge.

Students need to find themselves within the Jewish histories that we teach in order to form authentic identities that reflect and respond to Jewish communities both in the United States and around the globe. There has never been one Jewish culture or identity, so our students need the vocabulary and the frameworks to understand their own sense of self and belonging. While the pedagogical materials for this process are still being developed, it is crucial that added weight be given to student voices to tell their own stories and expand on what it means to be a Jew today.

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FROM SUPPLEMENTARY TO ESSENTIAL:

INTEGRATING JEWISH HISTORY INTO THE WORLD HISTORY CURRICULUM

Alex Mendez

Alex Mendez has taught History and English for more than two decades and is currently in his fourth year at Milken Community School in Los Angeles where he has developed a passion for Jewish History. He is particularly interested in the history of the Jews of Spain and their contributions to world culture.



Background and Goals

This article follows a year-long process that addressed multiple challenges in teaching Jewish History at Milken Community School, in Los Angeles, California. Within the school's social science department, Jewish History is addressed in a two-year course (grades 9 and 10) titled World and Jewish History.

The 9th grade course begins with antiquity and ends with the French Revolution, and includes Jewish History units focusing on First Century Judaea: The Jewish Reaction to Roman Encroachment through 70 C.E.; the Golden Age of Spain and the Expulsion of 1492: Conflict and Cooperation between Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Iberia; and the Haskala.

As we reviewed our program we realized that we wanted to make three significant changes. First, we decided to adapt the course to a developing standards-based curriculum. Second, we wanted to teach Jewish History as an integral part of historical eras rather than as supplementary units. Third, there was desire to diversify the course content to include previously understudied groups.

Integrating Jewish History: Specific Instructional Problems

The decision about integration was sparked by an observation by the rabbinic director that the course structure treats Jewish History as an addendum to the historical topics that are traditionally taught in similar courses that do not have a Jewish History component. For example, after the Roman history unit is completed and assessed, students learn about the history of first century Judaea as a related, but not integrated, topic. Indeed, we realized that treating the Jewish History as an addendum yielded insufficient time to treat that part of the curriculum sufficiently. For example, the Haskala did not receive sufficient instructional time as it is covered towards the end of the 9th grade in the same quarter as the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. While the subject is covered in other departments' courses, we noticed that this essential topic was not covered to the extent necessary to prepare students for further studies in 19th century Jewish

history as well as the development of Jewish identity within the historical context. This curricular situation required either cuts in content, which was not palatable, or a strategic decision on more effective integration of Jewish history into the “mainstream” historical topics. Thus began the process of integration.

Essential Questions for Jewish History: Goalposts for Student Learning

The first step was to formulate specific essential questions for Jewish History, and we developed the following:

- How have Jews/Jewish communities responded to internal and external threats?
- How have Jews/Jewish communities creatively adapted and contributed to global societies throughout time?

Although succinct, these questions have been vital in framing the teaching of Jewish History as well as its integration into the traditional historical topics. Firstly, the questions greatly eased the construction of both practice assignments as well as assessments within the context of the school’s emphasis on standards-based grading, as the students now have specific learning outcomes in their study of Jewish History. Furthermore, the questions attempt to gain a balance between the simplified lachrymose stance on Jewish history (Graetz) and a more complex approach towards the subject matter (Baron). The new formulation led to the creation of a specific assignment for the honors level segments of the course: an analysis of the complex and difficult set of interactions between the various groups of Jews living in Medina in the 7th century C.E., Muhammad and his Muslim followers, as well as non-Muslim Arabs. The specific assignment helped students break down monochromatic perceptions of the diverse groups living in Medina in the early Muslim period by learning not only about inter-group differences but also intra-group fissures. The specific text students analyzed was “Muhammad and the Jews of Medina” (chapter 5 from Rabbi Reuven Firestone’s [An Introduction to Islam for Jews](#)).

Diversifying Jewish History Content through Integration

One of the things we discovered through working on the integration process was that it was possible to do more even within the same amount of instructional time. Indeed, the integration process has allowed for greater attention to be paid to the Jewish History components of the course while not sacrificing other content.

First, the integration process has meant that Jewish history will be increasingly taught as part of the larger historical context students are learning as opposed to instruction of the topic as a separate stand-alone unit. For example, a new project-based assessment on the life of the 16th century conversa Gracia Mendes Nasi, which was originally taught as part of a stand-alone Jewish History unit will now be an integral part of the Renaissance topic, as Mendes Nasi’s life connects with essential subtopics of Renaissance studies including humanism, a renewed interest in secular learning, the system of patronage, the book publishing revolution, nascent capitalism and global trade, conflict between secular and sacred perspectives, and the evolving role of

women in society. Concurrently, the complex issues of commitment to Judaism and its values while experiencing both forced assimilation and increasing amounts of voluntary participation in non-Jewish society also help students deepen their knowledge of the Jewish experience. Furthermore, the life story of Mendes Nasi brings to the forefront a previously understudied individual whose life gives much insight into women's history from both the general Renaissance and Jewish perspectives while at the same time helping students learn about **the history of the Ladino-speaking Sephardi community**. The rich history of the Sephardim presents a history of cross-cultural connections and relates the many decisions Spanish Jews had to make as members of a larger Iberian community that presented both opportunities and challenges. Additionally, including Sephardi history is central towards creating a more diverse and inclusive form of Jewish History education that helps students learn about the many different Jewish experiences from around the world. The student population at Milken is very diverse, and it is one of my central goals as a teacher of Jewish History to facilitate learning about the history of my students' respective identities.

Ultimately, what emerges from this process is an interesting and enriching historical mosaic of diverse histories that shed light on one another, all within the currently available instructional time.

Conclusion

The benefits of integrating Jewish History are both practical to implement and productive, particularly in helping solve the difficult conflict between teaching enriching Jewish history content and having a limited amount

of instructional time. Additionally, integration helps students view Jewish History as part of General History, rather than as a supplemental moment that is presented only because it relates to the identity of the students. This is particularly important for the pre-19th century period as traditional history education largely ignores Jewish History from before the 19th century with this topic only "beginning" with the Dreyfus Affair. Therefore, teachers may be hesitant to include Jewish history as part of the World History curriculum for the pre-1894 periods as this step would require additional but unavailable instructional time. The integrative process, therefore, can be used as a way of refining World History courses to include more Jewish history within the available time. This instructional reflection will be helpful to World History teachers not only at Jewish schools but also for instructors at non-Jewish schools who will be able to include more Jewish History as part of the standards-based World History curriculum established by individual states with the additional benefit of students learning about the richness and diversity of the Jewish experience.

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ATTACHING OUR PAGES:

THE TEACHING OF JEWISH HISTORIES

Lisa Schopf and Deborah Skolnick-Einhorn

The study of history poses a fundamental question: Should we use a particularist lens to fully flesh out one group's experiences and identities or a universal one which weaves disparate voices, lives, and events to generate a collective narrative? The study of Jewish history offers its own twist on this classic question. Should we focus on Jewish history as a separate and unique academic discipline or should we situate our analysis within the broader context of general history? We propose an approach which navigates the balance between those two poles. Optimizing the balance of considering the unique stories and contextualizing these studies within the broader fabric of the historical narrative can help our students—and their teachers along with them—to better understand an authentic whole of our shared and diverse past, contemplate the development of our unique and evolving scholarship, embrace our multiple and common identities, and perceive the multiple pathways in our future.

Multiplicity and Context

There is no one narrative for Jewish history, yet there is a timeline of highlights and major events which we can use as guideposts to tether our sprawling storytelling. Understanding that central spine of our book helps different Jews begin to attach the pages of their unique narratives. We envision a central narrative which begins in the Biblical era, continues through our dispersal through the Diaspora and the various efforts to build a variety of Jewish communities, includes the emergence of antisemitism in different areas of the world through the cataclysm of the Holocaust and its impact on European and world Jewry, and brings us to contemporary Jewry with its various tribes and denominations.

A basic timeline of that sort invites a multiplicity of branches and elaborations. Those appendages to the timeline give context to the broader historical developments during each time frame, allowing us to explore them—pathways taken by Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews, by those who established communities in Israel before it was a state, in Arab lands, in Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas—comprising



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Deborah Skolnick-Einhorn has served as MILTON's Head of School since 2020. Previously, Dr. Skolnick-Einhorn worked at Boston's Hebrew College, including as Associate Dean of the Shoolman School of Jewish Education, where she prepared graduate students for careers in education.

the complexity that allows our history to gain authenticity in the fullness of its study of our histories. Whether this history is explored in a dedicated Jewish History course or as part of a more general history course or in the context of Judaic studies text classes, teachers can embrace the diversity and richness of the stories to create a tapestry more complex than any of its individual strands. And while some of those strands are those of victimhood, others are of triumph, integration into a broader society, contributions to host cultures, struggles, challenges, and advances. Our children need to have stories and a past that can serve them as a proud and authentic anchor as they draw from their roots to flourish into the future.

Textual Study

Jewish students often learn Jewish texts from their early years, focusing first on the simple meaning of the text and later exploring it with commentaries and interpretations. This type of scholarship provides a foundation for understanding how our heritage values questioning, debate, and collaboration. Students become part of this continuing chain of engagement and grapple with the texts that have become a connective thread for our community through the centuries. These texts defined ideology and practice through the ages, at times being influenced by their times and at times transcending them. Understanding the broader context in which those commentaries were composed adds breadth and depth and helps students to better understand their past and the contemporary relevance of the rabbinic writings.

Identity

Seeking the universal thread which connects

the various histories helps us to define ourselves through commonality, connection, and the shared. Noting the particular—the specific stories and unique experiences—can give definition through distinction and difference and the diversity within ourselves as a people. Exploring both the common and the distinct within Jewish history helps students build a complex and broad identity, both in what distinguishes them from others but also in what binds them to a collective identity. The multiple pathways that appear as spider web strands in the Jewish history atlas underscore the varied experiences, cultures, traditions, homelands, visions, and beliefs that developed. We have a chance to empower our students through reinforcing what they share with others in the development of their identity, while also articulating our current differences in terms of our views on our traditions, our place in general society, our outlooks on where we live, our perspectives on gender, and our relationship with leadership.

Future

Much of our study of the past is influenced by the educational choices of defining which people, events, and circumstances to explore. Appreciating the influence of the individual in shaping prior events and in defining our present-day understanding of past times can help us empower our students to grasp the perspective, wisdom, and commitment to define their future. Learning history is often attributed to helping forge the future with arguments about how the past recurs in themes and tropes that may not be the same as what has come before, but follows similar patterns. We often champion studying the past as a way of finding inspiration in our early role models and forerunners. By taking

into account the commonality and distinctiveness in our histories, we can help students begin to consider that their future is not pre-determined, but that they can help shape it by learning from their past. The past has more proof of the impossible becoming the lived reality and the improbable becoming the accepted than any of our best science fiction and fairy tales could offer. For a people with such a rich tradition, studying Jewish history offers immense promise for helping our students chart their futures.



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JEWISH HISTORY STARTS AT HOME

Michael Soffer and Moshe Simkovich

Michael Soffer is a veteran history teacher at Oak Park and River Forest High School in suburban Chicago. He has developed curriculum for the College Board, Newberry Library, Center for Talent Development, and Chicago Jewish Historical Society, and teaches courses in US History, Psychology, and Holocaust Studies.



Moshe Simkovich has been a Head of School, Congregational Rabbi, Educational Consultant, and Teacher in the United States and Israel. Rabbi Simkovich has been instrumental in developing innovative curricula and founding successful synagogues and Torah institutions.

A once bustling Jewish center, Chicago's West Side is now dotted with churches and apartment buildings, their exteriors still emblazoned with Hebrew inscriptions and Stars of David. A dozen miles west, crowded Jewish cemeteries have fallen into disrepair, their tattered tombstones resting under signs of long-forgotten synagogues. Farther north, in neighborhoods their grandparents left the West Side for, Jewish students sit in middle and high school classrooms, reading American History textbooks that largely gloss over their history.

But Jewish history is important, especially for Jewish students. Seeing one's self represented in the curriculum is vital to understanding one's roots, gaining perspective, and forming an identity. The Chicago Jewish Historical Society (CJHS) is pioneering a new, adaptable curricular approach that uses a deep dive into local Jewish history to explore larger themes in the American-Jewish experience. Intended for students between the 7th and 12th grades, the unit culminates with the class creating a mini-museum to document their city's Jewish history.

On the first day of the unit, student groups are each assigned a major theme in American-Jewish history, including Jewish migratory patterns, tensions over assimilation and heterodoxy, responses to antisemitism, and the very nature of a "community." Groups receive primary source documents relevant to their theme, and are tasked with summarizing the documents, analyzing what the documents indicate about their assigned theme, and explaining how their theme has manifested in their own lives. For example, the group focusing on migratory patterns received pictures and locations of two synagogues in Chicago, both of which moved multiple times as Chicago's Jewish community relocated.

The next phase of the unit provides students an overview of the city's historical timeline. Students read small sections of the city's Jewish history and become "experts" in their ten- or

twenty-year period, after which they create a timeline. In the pilot run of the program, which took place at Ida Crown Jewish Academy in December 2021, students each made a slide in a shared Google Slides presentation. They then examined the timeline of their city's history and periodized the history they encountered, naming each "era," and comparing their historiographical frameworks with one another.

The third phase of the unit tasks students with the creation of a museum exhibit about the topic that they found most intriguing. This summative project prioritizes student choice to increase engagement and ensure that students have the most meaningful experience possible.

The pilot was run with 12th grade students over the course of eight class periods. In the pilot, students chose their museum topics from a variety of options, including:

- a profile of a neighborhood's ethnic transitions
- an examination of Jewish cemeteries and their locations in non-Jewish areas
- an analysis of how Chicago's Jews experienced major moments in Chicago history, from the Chicago Fire to the Columbian Exposition to the Great Depression
- a deep dive into the attempted neo-Nazi march in suburban Skokie in the late 1970s
- profiles of major Jewish leaders of Chicago, from governors to a mayor to cabinet secretaries to various philanthropic or civic leaders.

Students also had a variety of options for their delivery mechanism, including creating a

virtual museum, turning historical scholarship into a children's story, or recording a podcast.

After completing their exhibits, students engaged in a "gallery walk," encountering and analyzing their classmates' exhibits and reflecting on how the unit's themes—introduced on the first day—manifested in the exhibits. They also wrote personal reflections about the experience.

Though COVID forced the gallery walk to Zoom, students still learned much more about their backgrounds, their connections to their city, and the general history of the American-Jewish experience. They saw how they fit into the history of Jewish Chicago and the larger history of American Jewry, examining how the themes they had studied came to life in the very environment in which they grew up.

As one typical student reflected:

The exhibit I connected with personally was the Civil War exhibit. I felt a connection to the Jews who fought for the army because my great-grandfather was in the military during WW2. He spent two years in the Indian Ocean on a supply ship for the American army war efforts. The time and resources that the Jews put into the Civil War made me think of this connection with my great-grandfather who put two years of his life into the military.

One key to the success of the pilot was the student-centered nature of the unit. The teacher operated as a guide, facilitating student exploration through the themes and time periods, augmented by primary source documents and other resources at each step. The opportunity for students to share the

results of their research into diverse topics enabled them to enhance their research skills, and to foster a passion for a part of their city's Jewish history.

Though the unit described here focuses on Chicago, the approach can be readily adapted to different locales. Another important aspect of the unit is its flexibility, as the unit can be condensed into one week or expanded, as time allows. Although at ICJA the unit was the concluding segment of a semester course on American-Jewish History, and served as a review of the course's major themes, the unit is designed to stand alone.

Jewish history will have more relevance to Jewish students if they see themselves and their families in the curriculum, and local history proffers a unique mechanism to make that relevance tangible.



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LEARNING JEWISH HISTORY THROUGH EXTRA-CURRICULAR PROGRAMS

David Hertzberg



David Hertzberg is Principal of the Yeshiva of Flatbush Middle School. Rabbi Dr. Hertzberg was ordained at Yeshiva University and earned his Ph.D. in Modern World History from St. John's University. He is also an Assistant Professor of History at Touro College.

There are many interesting approaches to teaching and learning Jewish history. The common denominator of many of them is that they take a direct approach—they teach Jewish history as part of the overall curriculum. While this approach is best positioned to cover the broadest historical scope and range, taking advantage of student participation in extra and co-curricular activities can be a productive supplement to help students to broaden their Jewish History knowledge and skills base. Students who participate in extra-curricular programs often have a very high level of motivation to get the most out of these programs. When these students realize that by mastering certain elements of Jewish history they also enhance their strive for excellence in their extra-curricular programs, they embrace the study of Jewish History as it relates to their program. In other words, adopting this approach provides students with added internal motivation to learn Jewish history.

One example of the efficacy of this approach is the school play. When students perform the classic play, *Fiddler on the Roof*, they study the history of the period and what life was like in Tsarist Russia. They are exposed to ideas of socialism, the challenges the Enlightenment posed to traditional Jewish values, and the push and pull motivations for emigration and immigration. Students, propelled by their pursuit to perform their roles with greater authenticity and feeling, are motivated to study the history of this period as part of their drama training—training which they are intrinsically motivated to pursue.

A second example of this approach is with the school choir. When the choir is performing the song “*Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*,” they study the background history of the song as well as the history of the Six-Day War and capture of the Old City and Western Wall. These lessons are brought home in vivid fashion, especially when studying the inclusion of the song’s final verse following the war. Students, who want to sing the song with all the emotion and yearning possible to enable the song to reach its potential heights, are better able to rise to this challenge if they are

familiar with its historical milieu.

A third example of this approach is with students who are working on a school shabbaton. Given the fact that these students are already interested in Shabbat, they learn about Prime Minister Menachem Begin's speech in the Knesset arguing for El Al to refrain from flying on Shabbat. In this speech, where he so eloquently describes the beauty of Shabbat, he references the city of Salonika in Greece that had its port closed on Shabbat due to the large number of religious Jews who worked in the commerce industry who refused to work on Shabbat. This learning venture enables students to learn about the beautiful history of the Jews of Salonika up until their destruction during the Holocaust, in addition to contemporary Israeli politics and history.

A final example occurred in our school this past year. A large group of our eighth-grade students participated in the very meaningful program **Names, Not Numbers**. Our students, like students in other middle schools, were very moved and inspired when meeting and interviewing the survivors. One group this year had the privilege of interviewing a 99-year-old gentleman who escaped on the Kastner train in 1944. Alerted to the controversy surrounding this episode in Jewish history, the students in the group wanted to learn about the Hungarian Jewish experience in the Holocaust in general, and about the Kastner train in particular as part of their preparation for the interview with the survivor. To this end, they worked with their teachers to reach out to the United States Holocaust Museum and arranged for a Zoom session with two of the museum's scholars who spent an hour teaching them about these topics and answering their questions. Motivated by their

desire to get the most out of their interview, they spent time learning about this very tragic but important time in Jewish history.

These are a few examples of how extra-curricular programs can help students learn Jewish history as a means of expanding their experiences in areas that at the moment are their main focus. This approach is not meant to take the place of a systematic approach to teaching Jewish History. It lacks the scope and breadth of a regular survey course or a course with a specific focus area. However, it does expose students to Jewish history and provides them with certain reference points as they hopefully expand their study of Jewish history. Likewise, it will engage students and hopefully, through this engagement, open their eyes to the beauty and value of studying Jewish history.



ANCIENT JEWISH WOMEN:

WHAT THEY TEACH US ABOUT OURSELVES

Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein



Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein received her Ph.D. (Midrash) and her M.A. (Ancient Judaism) from the Jewish Theological Seminary. Dr. Urowitz-Freudenstein teaches at TanenbaumCHAT, where her students know her as Dr. U-F, and she is Head of the Department of Jewish Thought. One of the courses she teaches and developed is “Gender and Judaism”.

The primary intention of teaching Jewish History in Jewish day schools is not to make young historians. Of course, there is nothing wrong with teaching, or even enjoying, history for history’s sake. However, teachers of Jewish History usually try to make the Jewish past and the students’ connection to it more meaningful in order to create meaning in the Judaism of our students’ lives today. If we want our students to feel this type of connection from the past to the present (and hopefully into the future), do they need to personally identify with historical events and the people that were a part of them? No, and yes. An Ashkenazi male student can identify with an account of a converso woman being accused of Judaizing during the Inquisition, just as a Sephardi male student can find meaning in the Diary of Anne Frank. However, sometimes students can benefit from hearing the story of someone in Jewish History who shares more with them than “just” religion. In the Jewish history we usually teach there are (male) rabbis and (male) writers and (male) philosophers, (male) poets and (male) leaders. Where are the women in Jewish History? Shouldn’t the young women in our classes have the opportunity to identify with and learn from the Jewish women of their past?

Until recently, history has been told by the “winners” and by those who could write it down or pay someone to write it down. In traditional patriarchal societies, this is usually not the women. The first known book written by a Jewish woman is the **Memoirs of Glikl of Hameln** written in the late 17th century. But, what about before then? Despite the paucity of attention to women in traditional Jewish History studies, there is a growing body of literature emerging focusing specifically on women—their lives and roles both as individuals and as historical figures. As teachers, we, and our students, benefit from this approach. It can enable us to teach about Jewish women of the past with whom our students, especially our female students, can identify. Our male students can also benefit and learn from the struggles and successes of these female participants in their Jewish pasts.

I teach an optional course to high school seniors in the Jewish Studies program at TanenbaumCHAT in Toronto. Its main focus is Jewish Women, and it combines Jewish History and Gender Studies. It is an exciting opportunity for our students to study women in Jewish History and appreciate them through a lens that they haven’t encountered in other classes. Who

were these women and how do we find out about them if their stories are not found in conventional history books? Current historians with an interest in these issues use different methodologies to bring the stories of women forward so they may be understood and appreciated. One of these ways is the study of physical artifacts. This can be particularly exciting and meaningful to our students, as photographs and videos of these “pieces of the past” are increasingly available to be viewed online.

In order to further appreciate women in ancient Jewish history, using these tools I have successfully taught about three different women known from three types of ancient artifacts from three different locations. We know more about these three than about many of their historical sisters, as they were wealthy enough to own land and therefore left documentation related to it. This documentation has been discovered, translated, and analyzed by archeologists and historians and their work is available to us, so we can pass on the stories of these women, our female ancestors, to our students.

Mibtahiah lived in the 6th century BCE on an island in the Nile River named Elephantine in a time period when Egypt was ruled by the Persian Empire. The community she lived in was multicultural as it was the home of the families of foreign mercenaries—including Jews—who worked for the Persian army. We know of her, the first documented Jewish woman known of outside of the Bible, from **papyri** that were official legal documents that included records of her marriages, divorces, and land acquisitions. We know that she was a Jew living in a diaspora community during the time of the First Temple and that she interacted with the non-Jewish society around

her. The Judaism she practised was different from the one in Jerusalem. She married twice and had children and was also able to acquire, inherit, and gift real estate and even initiate divorce. These demonstrations of power were not unique to her in her society. However, it is rare that we have multiple documents related to a named ancient diasporic, biblical era, Jewish woman with such capabilities. These details about this ancient Jewish woman can be enlightening to our students who may otherwise assume that ancient Judaism is monolithic and always oppressively misogynistic.

Babatha lived before and during the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (2nd century CE), in and around Judea which was under foreign rule (except for the short time when Bar Kokhba was successful). She was a refugee in that violent time and hid with others in the caves near the Dead Sea. Among the artifacts discovered by archeologists in one of these caves was a purse holding legal papers that have become known as the **Babatha Archive**. It contains 35 legal documents that teach us that Babatha was a landowner near Ein Gedi, was married and widowed twice, and was a second wife in her second marriage. She lent money and seized property when it was not repaid and was involved in Roman court proceedings regarding her family and properties. From the information on these documents, written in scrolls in the different languages used in the region, it may be deduced that she was responsible, resilient, intelligent, and strong; all qualities that can serve as inspiration for our students.

Rufina lived in **Smyrna**, in western Asia Minor, around the same time period as Babatha. We know of her and her accomplishments from an impressive physical artifact, an

engraved marble slab that she commissioned to mark a burial place for her household staff. It was written in Greek letters and threatens fines enforced by both the local Jewish and non-Jewish community for use of the site to bury anyone other than the members of her household. Rufina is not named in association with any male members of her family, and we do not know if she married or had children. The inscription explicitly identifies her as a Jewess, with the title “Head of the Synagogue.” The title is found on other ancient inscriptions as well and there are also other titles that are known from similar sources that may be compared to it: Patron, Elder, and Mother of the Synagogue. The **meaning of these titles is disputed by historians**, and none of them are found in rabbinic literature. They do not conform with any other known Jewish tradition of women being directly involved in public ritual matters. However, these titles clearly convey a sense of honor granted to these women, even though we do not know if this honor is derived from family connection, financial contribution, or a respect for wisdom, gained through experience or more formal methods of study. While there are still many unknowns about Rufina and other women like her, we can see from her example that ancient Jewish women were capable of controlling their finances and having a position of respect in the community, potentially even in the realm of the synagogue.

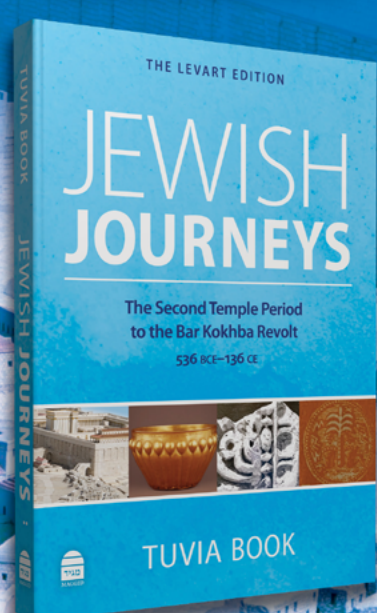
Learning about women like Mibtahiah, Babatha, and Rufina can serve as a reminder to our students that everyone counts. These women (and others) are worthy of notice, of study, and can teach us a great deal about our past. We should be teaching that people (even women), who are not considered “famous” in most Jewish History classes, lived lives

of responsibility, resilience, importance, success, and failure. These are ideas to which our students—even the ones who claim not to like Jewish History—can relate. We can demonstrate that ancient relics, and our ancestors that they illuminate, are important, and can teach us about our past and perhaps even ourselves.

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JEWISH HISTORY AS JEWISH PRESENT

Neil S. Rubin



Neil S. Rubin chairs the Jewish History Department at Beth Tfiloh Dahan High School. He also has served as Editor of the Atlanta Jewish Times and Senior Editor of the Baltimore Jewish Times.

Jewish History rocks. It's filled with pebbles, stones, and boulders that simultaneously cry, laugh, and sing. All form the foundation of contemporary Jewish life. So how does the Jewish educator create enthusiasm among teens to hear the objects' stories? After all, today's students are often more interested in TikTok than Masada rock. And they no longer need to memorize facts and dates as their teachers once did; they carry a device that quickly accesses virtually every book, sacred text, and tale humans ever recorded. With that in mind, today's educator needs to be prepared to help students understand how a moment, era, or trend in Jewish History is relevant today. Let's look at a few examples of how I do this in my own classroom.

For students learning about the Ten Lost Tribes of the Kingdom of Israel, the year 722 BCE is incomprehensible. Thus, after learning about the invasion of northern Israel by the Assyrians, leaving only the southern Kingdom of Judah intact, students jump into the living remnants of that time and place. In an exercise called "Find A Lost Tribe," they are divided into groups of two or three and are assigned one of the many communities around the globe claiming descent from ancient Israel—including far-flung groups in Papua New Guinea (tribal warriors who have a rallying cry of "*Shema Yisrael*"), ethnic Chinese Jews in Kaifeng, and the Lemba of Southern Africa (who make claim to the "*kohen* gene"). Students research and prepare a presentation on the group's history, their claim to be part of ancient Israel, how their identity as Israelites is manifested, their place in their country's broader society, and more.

As part of a unit focusing on the end of the Second Temple era, there are number of key issues which connect to realities in contemporary Jewish life. The exploration of Herod leads students to being able to respond to the question of whether Herod—with his megalomaniacal and murderous characteristics—was ultimately "good or bad for the Jews." An examination of ancient sectarianism connects easily to learning about today's various Jewish streams. Studying the Great Revolt against Rome (66-70 C.E.) opens up the legend and the history of Masada. This is done by exploring the desert fortress via photos, articles, and videos, followed by a written exercise focusing on Masada's shifting meaning to Jews from the ancient era to various phases in pre-state, early, and now contemporary Israel. This includes why Diaspora and Israeli Jews view the remarkable site through different lenses.

Here's another example. After several weeks of studies about American Jewish life in the Civil

War era, ninth graders put themselves in the mindset of Jewish soldiers from the North or the South. They write letters home on the eve of battle or to relatives in Germany or Poland. They must include paragraphs exploring their faith in the God of Israel, a sense of patriotism, fear and worry about family, etc.

And yet one more. Near the end of a senior-year course on Israel, students might be offered a unit called “What Makes Tel Aviv Cool?” After studying the creation of the city in 1909—surely one of the Zionist movement’s greatest successes—the teens pick a Tel Aviv venue they’d like to visit. Past choices have included the city’s raucous nightclub scene, trendy Rehov Shenkin, and even a venue called “**Dialogue in the Dark**,” which helps seeing people understand a blind person’s experience. As with all their projects, they research and present and evaluate each other’s projects. As a result of their choices, focusing on Israel as a real place, they nurture a life-long, meaningful bond with the history of the land’s places and peoples.

Linking the past with the present challenges the teacher and stretches the students. This approach has helped my students learn with increasing depth as they build new foundations of Jewish identity and connection.

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BALANCING GOALS IN TEACHING JEWISH HISTORY

Jeremy Shine



Jeremy Shine teaches Jewish History and Israel Education at Shalhevet High School in LA. He has co-developed integrated curriculum with World History, developed and taught Holocaust education curricula, and taught a graduate-level course on teaching Jewish history and college-level courses in Medieval Jewish History and in the Jewish political tradition.

For the passionate Jewish History teacher, the academic year is not long enough. There is much that you want to cover regarding core knowledge and academic skills while making space for both the topics and the types of projects and assignments that are most likely to engage the student. In this article, I offer a strategy for course design that balances core-knowledge coverage, academic-skills development, and in-depth engagement. I argue that, in

Jewish History courses, core-knowledge can be covered in separate units that provide an extensive survey. This strategy ensures coverage of what the teacher considers essential and lays the foundations and provides historical references and context for in-depth learning which follows. That in-depth learning is where students develop historical thinking skills, pursue their historical curiosity, and discover the significance of Jewish history. The time and space created by a concentrated intensive survey allows for flexibility and for the teacher to adapt course content to student needs and interests.

The Survey

I teach 9th grade Ancient and Medieval Jewish History and 10th grade Modern Jewish History at Shalhevet High School (Los Angeles, CA). For each semester there is one unit devoted to the survey. For example, in the first semester of the 9th grade course, eight lessons are devoted to an overview from Biblical Israel in the time of the Israelite tribes to the

Bar Kokhba Revolt. In the second semester, another eight-lesson unit surveys the era beginning with medieval times and ending with the Sephardic Diaspora that emerged after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. In the 10th grade course the surveys are extended to twenty lessons each: the first semester survey begins with a review of the Sephardic Diaspora and continues until the outbreak of the First World War, while the second semester continues to the 1970s.

In-Depth Learning

The in-depth learning units leave more room for creativity to strategically engage the student in the chosen topic and to move beyond the learning of names, dates, and places. These units

are where the students draw upon the survey knowledge that they learned, apply it to their own identity, and explore their own place in the Jewish world. These units have greater flexibility to encourage the students to pursue their historical curiosity and to personalize the significance of what they are learning for self-understandings of who they are as Jews as well as their relationship with the Jewish community and Jewish peoplehood.

For my 9th grade class, the in-depth learning units include “The Return to Zion,” “The Age of Hellenism,” “Jewish Identity in Roman Times,” “Medieval Jewish Life,” and “The Development of Judaism: From the Men of the Great Assembly to the *Rishonim*.” The latter unit, which is taught in the last part of the second semester, neatly reinforces the learning of the core knowledge from both 9th grade survey units while demonstrating the development of Judaism from ancient to early modern times. As for the 10th grade, in-depth learning units included a focus on Shabbetai Zvi, Jewish Emancipation, Gender and Jewish Assimilation, and a unit devoted to student historical research on the 20th century.

These units are also the place to introduce students to historical thinking skills. For example, “The Return to Zion” unit assessment scaffolds the writing of a history essay after teaching students about periodization, historical contextualization, analysis of evidence, and historical argumentation. A later 9th grade assignment is integrated with the World History course and requires the students to compare and contrast the impact of the printing revolution on both the Christian and Jewish worlds.

Conclusion

To teach Jewish History is to teach the

history of a people who have existed over two millennia and who have also spanned the globe. The challenge is immense. A historical overview is essential if the story of the Jews in ancient, medieval, and modern times is to have any coherence. Skillful balance of survey and in-depth exploration is a particular value in a Jewish history course where it is critical that a span of events be covered without sacrificing the student’s opportunities to make Jewish history personally relevant and meaningful.

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PROJECT BASED LEARNING IN JEWISH HISTORY

Alissa Zeffren



Alissa Zeffren teaches Tanakh and Jewish History at Ida Crown Jewish Academy, where she is also Student Activities Director and Program Director for Student to Student in Chicago. Alissa is currently completing an EdD from Azrieli in Jewish Educational Leadership and Innovation.

Jewish History is often situated at an intersection between general studies and Judaic studies. Given that Project Based Learning (PBL) provides opportunities to combine the rigors of a general studies curriculum with a values-based approach typical of Judaic learning, Jewish History provides fertile ground for PBL to create meaningful and authentic learning experiences for students.

On the discipline of Jewish History, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, identifies a fundamental distinction between the goals of historians in constructing history, versus memory. Jewish History, Yerushalmi argues, should be engaged in the construction of Jewish memory, meaning-making, and ultimately Jewish identity. While there is no equivalent word for "history" in Tanakh, Yerushalmi writes, the Tanakh is replete with the injunction to "remember," *zakhor*. As Adam Kirsch writes, "it is possible to see Judaism itself as a technology of memory, a set of practices designed to make the past present."

By making the learning active and concrete, PBL provides an opportunity for an immersive learning experience, which allows the individual student to become part of the memory-making process. In the Jewish History classroom, PBL—with its focus on research, real-world problem solving, critical thinking, collaboration, and authentic assessment and reflection—has the potential to create opportunities for fostering student engagement, personal connection, the construction of Jewish identity and historical memory, all helping to make the past present. Further, the PBL model also provides opportunities to layer in social-emotional learning (SEL) goals and social-emotional spiritual learning (SESL), including character-based education, as well as opportunities for differentiation among students with varying learning needs.

What follows below are several Jewish History PBL case studies of projects that engage Jewish History students in multimodal learning with varying degrees of comprehensiveness. Some have higher fidelity to the educational checkpoints of PBL, and some are "PBL light," meeting some of the checkpoints for PBL.

One example of PBL in the Jewish History classroom introduced this year was a Geonic

era inspired responsa project. After an introductory unit where we learn about the history of the Geonic period, individual *Geonim*, and their contributions, the project begins with the driving question: What is the process by which we get halakhic answers that are relevant to our lives as Modern Orthodox Jews today? The goal of the question, and ultimately the project, is to get the students to connect what they learned about medieval responsa to the real-world relevance of asking halakhic questions in their own lives.

Students work in groups to brainstorm and construct their own present-day questions to ask a halakhic authority in their lives. They then choose a medium through which they ask their query: email, text, in-person, or video conference. Each group researches what makes their particular question a complex halakhic issue in contemporary society. The students compile the halakhic responses, which include halakhic sources and explanations. Finally, each group presents their findings to their classmates and facilitates discussions on their topics, while answering questions from their peers.

The student-generated questions for the project include: Can you be a delivery driver for Uber Eats if you will be delivering non-kosher food? From a halakhic perspective, is digital theft considered stealing? Can teens get paid for running youth groups or working for a caterer on Shabbat? Is it permissible to be an organ donor? Students compare the process of responsa writing during the Geonic period with their own experiences, and finally they reflect on the value of having a halakhic authority in their own lives.

The students design the questions themselves, which they feel have personal relevance to their lives as Jewish teens living

in the modern world. As a result, they are more invested in learning the answers to their questions and in hearing the questions and answers other groups in the class come up with as well. Many of the students reflect that the experience of asking their own questions makes them feel like they are part of a living historical system of responsa, and that they would be more likely in the future to ask questions of a halakhic authority rather than just “asking Google.”

Another example is from an introductory unit to my Jewish History course. Students work in groups to analyze and compare ancient artifact inscriptions with corresponding verses in Tanakh. Their finished product is a curated exhibit and the creation of a 3D replica of their group’s assigned artifact. Yet another is a Jewish identity podcast. After learning about the challenges to Jewish identity and faith during the Hellenistic period, students explore contemporary challenges to Jewish identity and faith by interviewing an expert in their community and creating a podcast episode to share with the class and broader school community in time for Hanuka. Finally, a personal favorite, is a “March Madness” project in which students research and “seed” sixteen sages of the Middle Ages into an NCAA style bracket, and then evaluate in groups, based on their research into the impact and legacies of the sages’ works, which sage had the greatest impact in Jewish History.

Especially when introduced early in the curriculum, PBL can transform the Jewish History classroom environment into a learning community, foster critical and creative thinking, inspire real-world problem solving and production, and create lasting memory.

REMEMBER AND UNDERSTAND

Aubrey Isaacs



Aubrey Isaacs serves as Educator at the Alexander Muss High School in Israel. Born in Scotland, Aubrey made aliya after high school. He previously worked as Rabbi and Director of the W.U.J.S. Institute. Aubrey holds an M.A. in Jewish Thought from Ben Gurion University.

In his final song, Moses commands the Children of Israel: “Remember the days of old, seek to understand the years of each generation” (*Deuteronomy 32:7*).

As we ask how best to teach Jewish History in high schools, there are three principles I’d like to examine based on the wording of Moses’ command.

1. Moses speaks about remembering, implying that one must first acquire factual knowledge that makes sense and can sit in the memory. Only that way will the student be able to use the acquired information for her own thinking process.
2. Moses’ second instruction requires a search for understanding. The Hebrew word *Havana*, translated to “understanding,” denotes the ability to derive one piece of information from another. It implies the use of creative and critical thinking in a manner that will bring the individual to a personalized interpretation of what he studies.
3. The language used to describe history speaks of “each generation,” suggesting a need to differentiate between the generations and to gain an understanding of the distinct character of each time period.

Let us examine how we can apply these three principles to make Jewish History engaging, exciting, and meaningful.

The first principle, relating to knowledge acquisition, refers to our selection and organization of content. A Jewish History curriculum needs to present a narrative that is understandable because it is systematic and chronological. It needs to tell a story, with ups and downs, full of excitement, challenges, and dangers. We need to strive to have our students waiting with bated breath for the next installment—but the story must make sense. Each episode of our story needs to build on the previous episodes and the students will learn to understand the Jewish story as an unfolding drama. The chronology is important because it lays the foundation for understanding.

Our second task is to equip the students to engage in creative and critical thinking in order to find personal meaning. To enable that to happen, my agenda is to induce the student to enter

the story, not as an observer, but as an active participant. The key question that I always ask is, "What would you have done?" If you were alive in the days of Samuel the prophet, would you have supported or opposed the people's demand for a king? If you were alive at the time of Bar Kokhba, would you have joined the rebellion as encouraged by Rabbi Akiva or would you have chosen the path of the people of Tzipori and Ein Gedi who refused to join the rebellion? If you were a Jew suffering persecution in 15th century Spain, would you have sought to leave to build a life elsewhere or would you have accepted forced conversion and risked your life as a secret Jew?

These questions become the centerpiece of each topic studied. Once students are equipped with enough contextual understanding of the story to appreciate the complexity of the dilemmas, they are required to form and defend their opinions based on how they understand the historical situation. They are challenged to comprehend and analyze material and to develop the skill of arguing their position and expressing their ideas.

This methodology involves extensive classroom discussion and role playing. When the British offer the Zionist movement the option of a territory in Uganda, the class become delegates to the Sixth Zionist Congress and debates the issue. When Cyrus offers the Jews in Babylon the option of returning to Judea to rebuild the Temple, the students become the exiles who now need to decide whether to remain in Babylon or venture back to the land of their forefathers.

The climax of this learning process is when the students reach the realization that the historical dilemmas that faced their ancestors are not inherently different from many

questions facing contemporary Jews and themselves, as they seek to define their own Jewish identity. As they study the influence of Hellenism amongst the Jews under the Ptolemies and the Seleucids they grapple not only with, "What would you have done had you lived then?" but also with, "To what extent have we allowed American and western culture to affect our lives today?" They examine the question of how did the Jews survive the Babylonian exile and what was needed to maintain Jewish life as strangers in a foreign land, which leads directly into a discussion of what do we need to do to maintain Jewish life in the Diaspora today? And when we debate the question of whether Jews should have accepted the offer to set up a state in Uganda, it rapidly turns into an impassioned discussion about attitudes to the State of Israel amongst Diaspora Jewry today.

History cannot be taught unless the story is chronological and clear, but that is not the end goal, it is the means which enables them to tackle the most critical issue that faces them—the task of defining their own Jewish identity.





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