

The Museum: Another Resource for Achieving Excellence in Jewish Education

by Paul Radensky
and Nili Isenberg

Through the Living Museum™ program, students are motivated to take a greater interest in modern Jewish history by using artifacts to explore and research how Jewish history has affected their own families.

Jews are commonly known as the “People of the Book.” And, as is appropriate for a people who love to read and love to study texts, our history and our past are generally transmitted through our vast literature. As important as all these books are, however, there are other valid and effective approaches to the transmission of our heritage that should be counted among our tools as Jewish educators. These other approaches should elicit new responses in our students and engage them in the study of our history in innovative ways.

As a leading Jewish museum, one of the roles of the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust (the “Museum”) in New York is to introduce students and their teachers to the exciting study of Jewish heritage through artifacts. We introduce them to this idea through bringing them to the Museum itself, and through educational outreach efforts that bring our information to them in their schools. These efforts include opportunities for guest educators, print materials, and online programs, such as our Living Museum™, described in more detail later in this article.

Through all these opportunities we teach that even the simplest artifact can be a powerful educational tool. An artifact can begin to tell the story of an individual, a community, and even of an entire a culture. Examining an artifact carefully, a student becomes curious, asks questions, and is eager to learn even more to discover the secrets of the artifact’s past. In many circumstances, a special object was passed down from generation to generation for a reason, and tells an important story.

For example, a student may observe a child’s toy loom in the galleries of our Museum. The visitor is informed that young Yocheved Farber’s parents gave her this loom to help her maintain a sense of normalcy, despite the suffering she experienced in the Vilna Ghetto. With this information, the student may now look at the loom more carefully, drawn to the story of this young girl and her tragic circumstances. The artifact evokes the student’s curiosity when she observes that the pot-holder being created on the loom is unfinished. Combining her knowledge of history with her personal observations and inferences, the student soon understands that Yocheved was prevented from finishing her pot-holder when she was rounded up in a fateful Nazi *aktion*. Placed in the heart of the Museum’s collection of artifacts that are used to narrate a story of struggle and survival during the Holocaust, this artifact is among many others that can be used to give personal insight and evoke a powerful and lasting response in our students as they study our Jewish past.

At any museum, labeling artifacts with key information and organizing them into meaningful groups in galleries allows visitors to gain a sense of a larger story. Their understanding of this story is of a deep nature because it evokes an active curiosity, combines newly-learned information with previous knowledge, and involves the excitement of proximity to the authentic physical evidence of the past. As such, teachers may expand upon and advance their teaching by seeking out and utilizing museums in their communities. More specifically, numerous Jewish museums around our country provide an outstanding resource to advance our teaching of Jewish history.

Seeing their Place in Jewish History

Teachers can also bring the lessons of artifacts in their very own classrooms. The Museum, utilizing the lessons we have learned from years of experience in teaching from artifacts, now offers an innovative program to help teachers use artifacts to enable their students to see their place in Jewish history and in the Jewish community. The program, called the Living Museum™, motivates students in Jewish day schools and supplementary schools to take a greater interest in modern Jewish history by exploring and researching how Jewish history has affected their own families. During the Living Museum™, each student researches a single object from his or her family. Through learning the history of their families in this unusual way, students come to see how they themselves also belong on the continuum of the Jewish experience. With the Living Museum™, students also play

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an active role in the transmission of their history across the generations, from their older family members and into the future.

The program begins with a visit to the Museum, where Museum Educators introduce the ideas of learning from artifacts to teachers and students alike. The class participates in close observation activities, learning how to use artifact labels and gallery themes to understand the larger narrative of the Museum.

These exercises reveal the important tools used by curators and historians in the study of history through material culture.

After this introductory experience, students return home to work with their parents to pick their own family object or photograph to explore further. The importance of the artifact is the story it tells, not its monetary value or rarity. This is the same criterion we apply to our Museum's collections and exhibitions. A photograph or passport of a relative, a pair of brass candlesticks brought to the United States from overseas, or a meat grinder that was once used to make chopped liver for Passover are some examples that tell stories of a family's past. Some common stories that often emerge from the artifacts of Jewish families are personal experiences related to immigration, the Holocaust, and Zionism, for example.

Students bring their artifacts to school and discuss how they can learn more about their artifacts through research. Students today may immediately gravitate towards the Internet for their research, but the Living Museum™ encourages inter-generational learning instead. Personal stories of the artifacts are conveyed through the memories of family members. As such, the most important research activity for a student is an interview of older family members to explore and record the stories behind their heirlooms. The Living Museum™ provides suggested questions for students to ask their relatives to form the basis of an oral history.

After the students have decided on an artifact and have conducted their research, they learn how to create labels. An artifact label includes some basic information: the name of the artifact, its source, date, materials, size, a photograph of the object or the person who used it, and a brief passage relating the story the item tells about the family who owns it. Students complete their writing and editing of labels with their parents, who help identify the central messages of the object and its relevance to the family.

In the classroom, students then decide on the themes and organizing principles for an exhibition of all the artifacts. They reflect back on how the Museum organized its collection, and gather the artifacts according to theme, chronology, geography, or some other organizing element. The students then work together to name their galleries and to write wall texts describing the significance of the gallery in narrative form.

The class is then ready to display its Living Museum™ to the public. The students send out formal invitations to parents, the community, and possibly even the local press. On the given date, students bring their artifacts to school, arrange them and the labels on tables (galleries), and hang the wall texts. When the guests arrive, the students stand by their artifacts ready to practice their communication skills and share their important stories with the public. This opening is a gala event in which teachers, students, families, and the community take pride.


The program is especially valuable to communities where

there are few Jewish cultural institutions, since the students actually engage in the creation of a cultural venue derived from their community's own history. In this way, the students are transformed from learners into teachers.

Growing the Project

The Living Museum™ is a proven success in the New York tri-state area, where teachers and students have access to our Museum. Thanks to a generous grant from the Covenant Foundation, we are now creating a richly illustrated, interactive website so that the teachers and students who are not able to come to the Museum nevertheless will be able to learn how to successfully implement the Living Museum™ in their schools. At the core of the website is a sophisticated, multimedia teacher's guide containing detailed instructions showing teachers how they can visit a local museum of any type to introduce the program, and implement the rest of the program in their own classrooms.

Furthermore, this website can also be used to display a virtual version of the Living Museums created by the schools so that a wider public can learn from the accumulated knowledge about our Jewish heritage. Students will upload digital images of their artifacts, as well as accompanying label information and gallery assignments. As the site grows with school submissions, the participating students will not only be connected to their own family and local Jewish past, but to a growing number of other Jewish students and communities around the country.

These connections across communities and generations of Jews serve to make the study of our Jewish past exciting and relevant. The encounter with authentic artifacts, both at the Museum and in the classroom, can enliven this connection in ways that are different from the study of history in a book. We suggest and hope that teachers actively take advantage of this approach as a valuable resource towards achieving their goals of excellence in Jewish education. 

2007 CAJE Calendar



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| April 13 | Early Bird Deadline for CAJE 32 and the Early Childhood Conference |
| May 1 | Deadline to apply to represent CAJE at Limmud 2007 in England |
| June 15 | After this date, late fee applies for CAJE 32 and the Early Childhood Conference |
| August 2 - 5 | Pre-Conference at Washington University in St. Louis |
| August 5 - 9 | CAJE 32 and the Early Childhood Conference at Washington University in St. Louis, MO |
| December 31 | Deadline for submission to the annual David Dornstein Short Story Writing Contest |