

Why Study American Jewish History? by Jonathan D. Sarna

This article originally appeared in Fall 2003 issue of Torah at the Center, published by the Union for Reform Judaism. An earlier version of these remarks appeared in Moving Beyond Haym Solomon: The Teaching of American Jewish History to 20th Century Jews (Philadelphia: Feinstein Center for American Jewish History and the American Jewish Committee, 1996).

For many years, history held a central place in the curriculum of the Jewish school. Lady Katie Magnus' *Outlines of Jewish History*, the first book issued by the Jewish Publication Society (1890), was the textbook of choice, and it taught readers unabashedly heroic history, filled with sentiment, homily, and romance. Its aim was to turn students into "loyal and steadfast witnesses" — to keep them true to their faith.¹

History still constituted "the chief subject of study in the Jewish Sunday school" in 1932. A study by Julius B. Maller entitled *Testing the Knowledge of Jewish History*, published that year by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, called for the "reconstruction of the history curriculum in the Jewish school, with a shifting of emphasis from dates and names to interpretation." Where Lady Magnus was primarily concerned with maintaining Jewish loyalty, Maller stressed that the "ultimate aim" of Jewish history was "to enrich the inner life of the Jewish child."² He explained that Jewish history: deals with true stories of Jews who lived, struggled and exerted their influence, who were instrumental in making things better or worse. If the teacher succeeds in making the past living and real to his pupils, they will learn the good that has resulted from acts of loyalty and integrity. They will realize why there were martyrs, why these men deserve our recognition and gratitude. After the children will have long forgotten most of the dates and names connected with the various periods of Jewish history, their understanding of the significance of these periods will remain. This understanding, which will probably continue to influence their behavior in later life, is one of the ultimate aims of Jewish education.³

The object of Jewish history, according to this view, was to create role models for Jewish children, to provide them with heroes from the past with whom they might identify and whom they might seek to emulate.

American Jewish history, when it entered the school curriculum, fell heir to all of these various goals. It sought to instill pride, promote loyalty, and create effective Jewish role models for young people to follow. In addition, the first high school textbook in American Jewish history, Lee Levinger's *A History of the Jews in the United States* (1930), aimed to create "intelligent American Jews" who understood their home environment. The Jewish school, Levinger insisted, needed to compensate for the fact that there was "seldom much mention of the Jews" in the American history curriculum that students studied in public school.⁴

Notwithstanding all of these high-minded aims, history over the ensuing decades lost out in the competition for space within the Jewish school curriculum. Today, Bible, Hebrew, and holidays form the central themes of Jewish education; Jewish history, and especially

American Jewish history, are neglected. Some teachers, seeing how little attention is paid to history in the secular curriculum, wonder why they should be teaching Jewish history at all.

New Answers to the Question

Scholars have recently proposed a variety of new answers to the question of why Jewish history, and especially American Jewish history, should be taught. Their arguments may be summarized as follows:

- American Jewish history contextualizes contemporary challenges facing American Jews. It helps American Jews understand where they are by showing them where they have been and allows them better to appreciate what sets them apart both as Americans and as Jews.
- American Jewish history deepens students' understanding of America and shows them how their ancestors fit into the larger picture of American society.
- American Jewish history broadens students' horizons, helping them to appreciate different ways of life, different points of view, and the impact of change over time.
- American Jewish history teaches students how to read, understand, and internalize primary source texts.
- American Jewish history helps to deepen attachments to Judaism and the Jewish people.
- American Jewish history communicates the enduring power of religion in America and shows how Jews have formulated religious identity in a distinctively pluralistic setting.
- American Jewish history bridges the gap between collective experiences and personal stories. It helps students find the links between their own history and the history of the Jewish people as a whole.
- American Jewish history encourages students to integrate Jewish and secular studies by forging chronological and conceptual links between them.
- American Jewish history is a form of collective Jewish memory, and as such a vital part of Jewish identity.
- American Jewish history offers students tools to think historically about what constitutes the Jewish family, Jewish space, Jewish religion, and Jewish work, how they themselves relate to these concepts, and ultimately what it means to be an American Jew.
- American Jewish history helps Jews appreciate the common past shared with other American Jews.
- American Jewish history helps provide Jews with a master story that unites them both vertically with their ancestors in previous eras and horizontally with Jews who live in other communities. It makes them appreciate that they are part of something much larger than themselves and creates a shared sense of community.
- American Jewish history forms the basis for the shared Jewish memories that are basic to both Jewish identity and Jewish community.

Several of these objectives apply to all forms of history instruction.⁵ The study of the past, they suggest, places present-day problems in perspective and teaches valuable textual and evidentiary skills that students can put to practical use later in life. Other objectives might be used to justify teaching American Jewish history in a non-Jewish setting, as part of the American experience as a whole. The overwhelming majority, however, justify the teaching of American Jewish history on the basis of Jewish identity formation. The aim of American Jewish history teaching, they claim, is to link Jews one to another, to create shared Jewish memories, to promote community.

Deepening students' Jewish identity is, of course, a noble endeavor, but using American Jewish history as the vehicle to accomplish this aim raises significant problems. What do we do, for example, about unpleasant facts: criminality, slaveholding, intermarriage, or even (for those who teach in a Reform setting) the postwar resurgence of Orthodoxy? How, moreover, will students react later in life when they learn the more complex realities of the American Jewish experience; will they feel that their religious educators betrayed them? Even now, are we providing students with a portrait of American Jewish history that is as multi-faceted and self-critical as their curriculum in American history? And, if not, what message are we unintentionally conveying—not just about American Jewish history but about Jewish education in general?

One prominent educator argues that “history is only meaningful when it becomes memory” and that the task of Jewish educators is to “give life to Jewish history by translating it into memory for our students.”⁶ This, again, sounds like a noble goal, but as readers of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982) know, the relationship between Jewish history and Jewish memory is anything but simple. Memory, after all, plays tricks; it is fleeting, selective, and highly subjective. Students need to learn how to distinguish history from memory; the distinction is essential to critical thinking. Hanukkah, for example, is part of Jewish history; the so-called Hanukkah miracle, the cruse of oil that kindled for eight days, is part of Jewish memory. Rabbi Judah Loew b. Bezalel of Prague (1525-1609) is part of Jewish history; the golem attributed to him (in a book published in 1909) is part of Jewish memory. Haym Salomon (1740-1785) is part of Jewish history; his reputed funding of the American Revolution is part of Jewish memory. It is unquestionably important for educated Jews to absorb both Jewish history and Jewish memory, but the two should never be confused.

Elsewhere, I have spelled out a somewhat different set of reasons for teaching American Jewish history, placing less emphasis on identity and more on tensions and continuities within the American Jewish experience as a whole.⁷ In rethinking the issue now, I am inclined to believe that there is yet another theme that deserves emphasis, one that those of us engaged in the study and teaching of American Jewish history too often take for granted, not realizing how much of an impression it can make upon our students. The theme is human potential, in our case, the ability of American Jews — young and old, men and women alike — to change the course of history and transform a piece of the world. American Jewish history is, after all, not just a record of events; it is the story of how people shaped events — establishing and maintaining communities, responding to

challenges, working for change. That, perhaps, is the greatest lesson of all that American Jewish history can offer our students: that they too can make a difference, that the future is theirs to create.

Endnotes:

1. Magnus, Katie. *Outlines of Jewish History*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1890, pp.333-334; Jonathan D. Sarna. *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989, pp.29-33.
2. Maller, Julius B. *Testing the Knowledge of Jewish History*. Cincinnati: Department of Synagogue and School Extension of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1932, pp.v, vii, 138.
3. *Ibid*, vii-viii.
4. Levinger, Lee J. *A History of the Jews in the United States*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1949, pp.vii-x, 3. On this and other textbooks in the field, see Jonathan B. Krasner, *Representations of Self and Other in American Jewish History and Social Studies Schoolbooks : An Exploration of the Changing Shape of American Jewish Identity* (Ph.D. thesis, Brandeis University, 2002).
5. See Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg (eds.) *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History* (New York: NYU Press, 2000).
6. Stein, Regina, "Teaching American Jewish History As A Story," *Moving Beyond Haym Solomon*, 26-29.
7. Sarna, Jonathan D, "Toward A New Approach to the Teaching of American Jewish History," *The Principal* 31 (May /June 1986); *idem*, *The American Jewish Experience* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 2nd ed., 1997), pp.xiii-xix; *idem*, "What's The Use of Local Jewish History," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 12 (November 1995), 77-83.