

# HISTORICAL MEMORY AND JEWISH IDENTITY: 350 YEARS OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY: WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

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**I**t is a great pleasure to be here: A privilege like this comes but once in 350 years! Robert Rifkind has already set forth some of the planning that has gone into the 350th. He has *not* told you that he personally played an absolutely central role in ensuring that there would be a 350th anniversary celebration of American Jewish life. Back in 1954, the American Jewish Committee as a whole played a lead role in what was known at that time as the American Jewish tercentenary—300 years of American Jewish life—and on the committee that planned that event sat, among many other AJC notables, Judge Simon H. Rifkind. Fifty years later we see the family tradition continuing.

## **What We Are Commemorating at the 350th**

The question I think many are asking today is what really are we commemorating in 2004? Why bother about something that happened 350 years ago? The simple answer is that we are commemorating the arrival in New Amsterdam of a small boatload of Jewish refugees from Recife, Brazil: “Twenty-three souls big and little”—an old record relates. Some have now disputed that precise number, but nobody can dispute that they were all impoverished refugees. Jews (and, by the way, Protestants too) had to leave Recife, after the Portuguese recaptured it from the more tolerant Dutch. All alike

were given three months to leave, and the Jews were wise enough to take the hint.

Today we know that these refugees were not really the first Jews to set foot on North American soil. (Historian Jacob Rader Marcus used to say that nobody is *ever* the first Jew anywhere. There is always another Jew who was there before.) In the American case, we now know that one of those who came before was a metallurgist named Joachim Gaunse, who came to the settlement of Roanoke Island in 1585. (*See Timeline, page 24.*) Then he went back to England, questioned the historicity of the Virgin Mary, was thrown into prison, and never was heard from again. There were also a few other intrepid Jewish traders who stopped in briefly at various colonial ports in the intervening years, especially in the early 1650s. But September 1654 is nevertheless an appropriate date for us to commemorate, for the refugees from Recife who landed in New Amsterdam came to settle permanently; theirs was not just a one-night stand in some harborside inn.

The year 1654 marks the beginning of Jewish communal life in North America. These early Jews overcame a series of legal and political obstacles, including opposition from the colony's governor, Peter Stuyvesant. With help from the Jewish community back in Amsterdam, they won the right to set down roots in New Amsterdam—specifically the right to “travel,” “trade,” “live,” and “remain,” provided that “the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation.”

### **The Role of Jews in American Pluralism**

The story of early American Jewry reflects some very important themes that should continue to concern us. From the very beginning, for example, the fate of Jews in America was tied in with that of other religious dissenters. “Giving them [Jews] liberty,” Peter Stuyvesant wrote, “we cannot refuse the Lutherans and the Papists.” The decision about admitting Jews to New Amsterdam was, at the

deepest level, a decision about the social and religious character of New Amsterdam. Because the Jews and the Lutherans and the Papists (meaning the Catholics) did eventually receive liberty, New York became, as we know, a multireligious, multiethnic, and multilingual community—and so, eventually, did the nation as a whole. Small as they were in number, Jews played an important part in that early story and have remained part of the story of pluralism and tolerance in this country ever since. AJC has played a vital role in this area for almost a full century.

No less important a theme from 1654 is the fact that the Dutch authorities, forced to choose between their economic interests and their religious sensibilities, voted with their pocketbooks in allowing Jews to remain—a significant sign of modernity. The “usefulness” of Jews, that they might help to enrich the colonies, proved far more important to the Dutch than that they were not Christians. The Dutch West India Company was worried that a heavy-handed and restrictive colonial policy would diminish the population, discourage immigration, and scare off investors. Its advice to Stuyvesant in 1663 might profitably be studied by some of our politicians and religious leaders today. “Shut your eyes, at least [do] not force people’s consciences,” the company wrote, “but allow everyone to have his own belief, as long as he behaves quietly and legally, gives no offense to his neighbor and does not oppose the government.”

In short, 1654, viewed in its proper perspective, is truly an important historical milestone. It serves as a jumping-off point for recalling and exploring a whole range of significant themes, many of which are still highly relevant today.

### **Why American Jewish History Matters**

Of course, the 350th anniversary of American Jewish life should not exclusively focus on 1654. We have, after all, come a long way from those initial Jews from Recife. My hope is that we will celebrate, commemorate, and investigate all aspects of American Jewish life in 2004-05: heroes and villains, time-tested themes and neglect-

ed ones. The 350th anniversary should mark a serious educational and intellectual milestone in American Jewish life: a time to learn from our past, reflect upon our present, and shape our agenda for the future.

In looking at my son's high school history textbook recently—it includes, by the way, next to nothing on American Jewish history, and that is true of almost all American history textbooks in this country—I was nevertheless interested to see that each chapter in the book ends with a section entitled “Why it matters.” That, I think, is a good question for us to ask as well. Why should we care about these events? Why should we ask others to care about them? Why should we still consider our history important and relevant?

This is not the occasion for a full-scale exploration of this theme, but one point is critically important. Both Jews and non-Jews today tend to view Jewish history in tragic or lachrymose terms. When people think of the history of the Jews, they think of persecution, expulsion, tragedy, mass-murder, and now terror. The magnificent and highly popular Holocaust Museum in Washington reinforces that somber view of our past, as does every incident of Middle East violence.

### Why American Jewish History Is the Exception

American Jewish history stands as the great exception to this melancholy story. Without downplaying the history of anti-Semitism here—and we shouldn't downplay it—the fact remains that persecution, expulsion, tragedy, and mass murder are *not* the central themes of American Jewish life and never have been. Instead, American Jewish history offers us the opportunity to explore how Jews have flourished in a free and pluralistic society where church and state are separated and where religion is entirely voluntary. If there is a central theme to American Jewish history, it is the story of how Judaism and Jewish life have been transformed by freedom; that, in fact, will be the central theme of the forthcoming National Museum of American Jewish History being built in Philadelphia, just opposite (appropriately enough) the Liberty Bell. Freedom, of

course, is not an unmixed blessing.

Freedom carries with it significant perils to Judaism and Jewish life. Some minority groups in America—think of the French Huguenots—have literally been loved to death in this country, intermarrying out of existence, and that danger threatens us too. We worry about it; our Armenian and Greek Orthodox neighbors worry about it; all endangered minority groups in this country worry about it. But even with this fear, American Jewish history necessarily challenges the standard narrative of persecutions and expulsions—what one wag summarized as “they tried to destroy us, God saved us, let’s eat”—and encourages us to explore an entirely different set of questions which emerge, unsurprisingly, from the central themes of American life: freedom, diversity, and church-state separation.

There are many other reasons as well for studying American Jewish history. The American Jewish Committee and Temple University’s Feinstein Center a few years ago published *Moving Beyond Haym Solomon: The Teaching of American Jewish History*, forty-four thoughtful pages on this subject, reminding us, for example, that 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. It helps Jews find the links between their own history and the history of the Jewish people as a whole. It provides 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 Jews appreciate that they are part of something much larger than themselves and creates a shared sense of community. The writer Nessa Rapoport adds that our obligations are really to posterity. Our job is “to translate and explain what has come before us to those who will carry it on after us.”

Another writer, the great Norwegian novelist Ole Edvaart Rolvaag, once wrote that “when a people becomes interested in its past life [and] seeks to acquire knowledge in order to better under-

stand itself, it always experiences an awakening of new life.” The 350th anniversary of American Jewish life provides us with a welcome opportunity to profit from Rolvaag’s keen insight. To study the history of American Judaism is, among many other things, to be reminded anew of the theme of 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 is perhaps the greatest lesson of all that American Jewish history can offer us: the lesson that we too can make a difference, that the future is ours to create.

**Celebrating  
350 Years  
of American  
Jewish Life**

**THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE**

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