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## THE STATUE OF LIBERTY CELEBRATES HER 100th BIRTHDAY

The Statue of Liberty, also known as Liberty Enlightening the World, stands in New York Harbor since 1886. It served to welcome immigrants who fled from countries of their birth to avoid persecution. Many of these refugees were Jews seeking a new land where they could not be denied the rights of citizenship.

The statue was given to the people of the United States by the people of France to celebrate French-American friendship. Over the years, vandals and weather have taken a heavy toll in damage, but the long decline ended in 1965 when Ellis Island was turned over to the National Park Service and made part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument.

To restore the statue and Ellis Island, a foundation was formed headed by Lee A. Iacocca to raise the necessary funds. While it took over a half million dollars to build the statue, it required millions of dollars to restore it. The goal for restoration was set for \$230 million, \$39 million was earmarked for the statue alone. The funds were raised from the business community, school children and the general population.

A symbol of hope, promise and opportunity, the statue represents the figure of a woman clutching the torch of freedom and liberty in her upraised right hand. In the left arm, she holds a tablet with the date of



the Declaration of Independence inscribed in Roman numerals. A broken shackle at her feet symbolizes the bonds broken in the struggle for freedom. The statue rests on a pedestal and base almost the height of the statue itself.

# TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

by Jonathan D. Sarna

Recent years have seen a host of new curricula that have changed the face of Jewish education. Subjects such as Bible and Hebrew are now taught in entirely new ways, reflecting new aims and a broader general conception of how these discrete subjects relate to larger aspects of Jewish life.

Unfortunately, no similar reconceptualization has taken place in the field of American Jewish history. That is still being taught as it has been for decades — as a series of vignettes selected from the historical literature and designed to engender a sense of patriotism and civic pride but little else. Students may learn something about immigration waves to the United States, and about American Jewish heroes. But the importance of the subject as a whole — why it deserves a place in the crowded day school curriculum, and how it can contribute to the education of the American Jewish teenager — this has not yet been translated into curricular terms.

Clearly, a new curriculum in American Jewish history needs to be written. While the facts have not changed, our understanding of them and of their larger importance certainly have, and this new understanding needs to be transmitted to our pupils. American Jewish historians are now asking far more sophisticated questions than they ever have before, and are approaching a new and more complex understanding of American Jewish life, one with important implications for all Jews living in America today.

As a partial response to this critical need, Benny Kraut, Samuel Joseph and I at the Center for the Study of the American Jewish Experience have recently produced *Jews*

*and the Founding of the Republic* (Markus Wiener Publishers), a curriculum resource package dealing with one major facet of the American Jewish experience. It includes primary sources, secondary sources, maps, illustrations, bibliographies, and a guide to available resources and materials designed for use by instructors at all levels. Those planning to teach such subjects as Jews and the coming of the American Revolution, Jews in the Revolution, the impact of the Revolution on American Jews, the relationship between the nation and the Jewish community, and biblical imagery and the Revolution can find most of what they need here, including documents that can be photocopied for classroom analysis and suggestions for additional sources that may be used for class enrichment. The introductory note to teachers excerpted below indicates the kinds of new questions and approaches that American Jewish historians are now bringing to the study of subjects such as these:

Several themes emerge from this volume which may be highlighted in a classroom presentation. We pose them here as a series of five questions:

1. How was the American Jewish experience in the Revolution like and unlike that of Americans generally?
2. How did the founding of the Republic affect the subsequent course of Jewish history in America?
3. In what ways does the history of the founding of the Republic demonstrate American exceptionalism with regard to Jews? In what ways was America just like European countries?
4. How did being Jewish affect one's being an American in the early Republic? How did being an American affect one's being Jewish?

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Jonathan D. Sarna is Associate Professor of American Jewish History at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and Academic Director of its Center for the Study of the American Jewish Experience.

5. How was the American Jewish experience in the Revolution similar to and different from the American Jewish experience today?

Of course this list lays no claim to being exhaustive. Instructors will discover in *Jews and the Founding of the Republic* data bearing on other questions as well. What we have tried to stress, however, is the importance of viewing the American Jewish experience in its broadest context: as the interrelationship between the narrow history of American Jews and the wider currents of American, Jewish and world historical developments. Lending significance to the topic in this way avoids many of the dangers usually associated with "minority group history." It permits American Jewish history to be viewed as it should be viewed: as part of a larger mosaic that is our collective past.

The approach to American Jewish history described here and illustrated throughout *Jews and the Founding of the Republic* presupposes that American Jewish history is an important subject integrally related to other subjects that students are studying. For some, however, this assumption still needs to be justified. There is for them no escaping the most basic question that anyone engaged in teaching American Jewish history must initially answer: Why teach the material in the first place? In what follows, I offer my own answer to this question in the form of five guiding principles from which individual lesson plans can flow.

First, a study of American Jewish history teaches us that *Jews in America have a history*. As human beings, we seek roots, we are interested in where we came from, and we crave the legitimacy that the past bestows. We Jews particularly respect *yichus*, family pedigree, not because we are determinists but because we have learned to respect the power of tradition. We know that we have been shaped by those who came before us. Precisely because the past has this power, many have tried to write Jews out of

history. To this day, many general history books present Jewish history as something that ended with the destruction of the Temple and the rise of Christianity. According to this view, modern Jews are merely what the historian Arnold Toynbee called a fossil — remnants of a bygone era. One of the tasks of every Jewish history course is to demonstrate that this is utterly false and that we have continuous history dating back some 3500 years, and in America since 1654. Many of our students do not know that American Jewish history goes back further than the twentieth century. They assume, as many Americans do, that Jews were latecomers who benefitted from the laws and institutions created by others. In fact, American Jews have played a significant role in American history, one that speaks for itself without need for exaggeration and without filiofetism. The first responsibility of any American Jewish history course is to relate in a precise, accurate, and thoroughly balanced fashion what Jews did, and how their contribution affected the future course of America generally and American Jewish life in particular.

Second, American Jewish history teaches us that *Jews in America have a useable history*, that is to say a history that can teach us something about the present. Just as the Bible is studied with an eye towards eternal truths as relevant for Jews today as for their ancestors thousands of years ago, so American Jewish history properly studied can shed light on issues from the past that American Jews of today can learn from. The Revolutionary War period, for example, offers an opportunity to teach students about the development of church-state separation in America and its impact on American Jewish life. Disputes over the place of religion in America, evident in the early period, shed light on disputes that still periodically wrack the country, and will help students understand the attitude of those who view the country in Christian terms. Or, to take another example, there is a marvelous document by an isolated Jewish woman named Rebecca Samuel, living in Petersburg, Vir-

ginia who writes home as follows to her mother:

One can make a good living here, and all live in peace. Anyone can do what he wants. There is no rabbi in all of America to excommunicate anyone. This is a blessing; Jew and Gentile are as one. There is no *galut* here. In New York and Philadelphia, there is more *galut*. The reason is that there are too many German Gentiles and Jews there. The German Gentiles cannot forsake their anti-Jewish prejudice; and the German Jews cannot forsake their disgraceful conduct; and that's what makes the *galut*.

One can imagine a lively discussion based on this comment alone that would encourage students to come to grips with the pros and cons of being a Jew in America, the whole question of assimilation and identity.

What I am suggesting here is that one of the primary obligations of my American Jewish history course is to teach students how to bring the fruits of accumulated past wisdom to bear on contemporary questions. Too often, non-historians believe that every situation is brand new — unprecedented in the history of the world — so they do not even look to the past for guidance. Students properly trained in history can learn more from experience. They may not be able to resolve the dilemmas inherent in being an American Jew, but they can at least understand them, and realize that they are not alone in facing up to them.

Third, American Jewish history teaches us that *Jews in America have a variegated history*, a history that is much richer and more diverse than most students realize. Jews, especially Jews in large urban areas, tend to assume that their city and state is a microcosm of America at large, if not the diaspora as a whole. They have trouble visualizing how Jews in earlier days and other parts of the country lived and still live, and how much more difficult it was and is for them to preserve their Judaism,

especially outside of a largely Jewish environment. American Jewish history, properly studied, counters this ethnocentrism by enlarging students' awareness of the rich possibilities inherent in the American Jewish experience. Students should be encouraged to read about growing up in the South, perhaps through selections from Eli Evans's *The Provincials*. They should read accounts of Jewish pioneers, and learn about Jews in rural areas. They should also read immigrant accounts to learn of the difficulties that newcomers faced in keeping the rudiments of Jewish law. The aim should be to teach students first to be more tolerant of Jews who live different kinds of Jewish lives, and second to realize how fortunate they are to be able to live at a time and in a place where they can carry on a thoroughly Jewish life with relative ease. This might, in fact, be an opportunity to raise the question of what students would do if faced with the choice between working on Shabbat, and not working at all — a choice that many immigrants and their children faced (and many still face) all too often. One of the primary obligations of an American Jewish history course, especially at a more advanced level, is to fight the kind of complacent tunnel vision that young Jews comfortable in their own environment too easily fall prey to.

Fourth, American Jewish history teaches us that *Jews in America have an organic history*: that differences notwithstanding, we are nevertheless integrally related to one another; we form one people. Stress should be placed on the contribution of different communities to the development of American Jewish life, and on the ties that bind Jews in various communities to one another. Students should be introduced to concepts like "center" and "periphery", and should be encouraged to talk about relatives who may have lived in remote parts of the country. Perhaps Jewish newspapers from different cities should be examined for clues as to what makes one religion of the American Jewish community part of and yet apart from another. This

is also the place to introduce students to differences in heritage between immigrant waves that have impacted upon American Jewish life — Sephardic Jews, German-Polish Jews, East European Jews, and more recent immigrants. Students should emerge from an American Jewish history course understanding that there are many kinds of American Jews and many ways of being an American Jew — all of them legitimate, all of them part of one organic unity that we call American Jewish life.

Fifth, American Jewish history teaches us that *Jews in America have a history that binds across time*. We are, in other words, not only bound to one another, but also part of an ongoing part of history: links in an endless chain stretching from past to future. American Jewish history properly studied fights present mindedness and fights the ahistorical notion that “nothing ever changes.” Students need to know that *everything* changes, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, sometimes cyclically. Today’s news is tomorrow’s history. Students who have already charted their “roots” will have some appreciation of this phenomenon. Others should be encouraged to talk with grandparents, and to find old family scrapbooks. A healthy respect for what has gone before, and a realization that it has impacted upon the present, should help students to realize that just because something is new, does not necessarily make it better. History thus underscores the importance of tradition, even as it shows the value that has sometimes come from breaking away from tradition. Here again, a tension of great importance to the life of every American Jew — tradition versus change — is posed in a historical setting where it can be discussed in a non-threatening and yet thoroughly relevant way.

Keeping in mind these five principles — Jews in America have a history, Jews in America have a useable history, Jews in America have a variegated history, Jews in America have an organic history, and Jews in America have an ongoing history —

should allow for more creative curriculum designs in American Jewish history than have so far been forthcoming. No less than other subjects, American Jewish history has the potential for teaching junior and senior high school students essential values and principles that may guide them throughout the rest of their lives. An effective curriculum in American Jewish history should offer students important insights into the world of their parents, their world, and the world that they will live in and shape as responsible Jewish adults.

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(Continued on page 8)

## YIVO EXHIBIT ON IMMIGRATION AND LANDSMANSHAFTN

On January 20th, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research opened an exhibit tracing the history of landsmanshaftn — Jewish fraternal mutual aid societies — and the role they played in the lives of Eastern European Jewish immigrants and their descendants.

The exhibit, which will run through June, draws on YIVO's Landsmanshaftn Archive, a collection of thousands of documents, photographs, banners, ballot boxes and numerous other artifacts from over 800 of these societies, about 100 of which are on display.

The landsmanshaftn was described by exhibit curator Dr. Jenna Weissman Joselit as a "grass-roots" institution created by Jews who arrived in the U.S. during the period of mass migration from Eastern Europe, 1880-1924. With 6,000 landsmanshaftn flourishing in the heyday of these societies, their combined membership "probably outnumbered that of the synagogues and labor unions combined," she said.

Composed of Jews who hailed from the same locality, the landsmanshaftn was the immigrants' "first address" in America, she continued. One member called it a "personal, friendly Ellis Island," and the handshake, often used as the landsmanshaftn logo, is the symbol on the YIVO exhibit.

The landsmanshaftn functioned both as a mutual aid society, where members could borrow money, find jobs, dispense charity, and buy cemetery plots, and as a "warm environment where they could reminisce about the Old Country and participate at their own pace in American culture," said Joselit.

The "Hello Landsman" exhibit traces the history of the landsmanshaftn through its three main historical periods, illustrating the text with artifacts. The periods were the early immigrant stage, during which it "cushioned the transition from the Old World to the New;" the inter-war period, when members reached out to help the relatives and friends they left behind; and the post-Holocaust era, when it sought to "memorialize and preserve a now-vanished way of life."

YIVO is located at 86th Street and 5th Avenue in Manhattan.

"Education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave."

— Henry Peter, Lord Brougham (1778-1868)

(Continued from page 6)

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