Patriotism and Parochialism: Why Teach American Jewish History, and How?
Jon A. Levisohn

Online Publication Date: 01 September 2004
To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/0021624040700303
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0021624040700303

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

© Taylor and Francis 2007
Patriotism and Parochialism: Why Teach American Jewish History, and How?1

Jon A. Levisohn

Jon A. Levisohn is assistant research professor of Jewish Education at the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, Brandeis University.

More than any other study [history] can aid in evolving a wholesome Jewish world outlook ... A thorough knowledge of Jewish history and Jewish achievement will go far in saving our children from the danger of complexes to which normally their lives may be subject. (Golub 1940:207)2

When the study of the past is clothed in such moral tones, history is transformed from an attempt, however imperfect, to order and interpret a complicated mass of conflicting data into a guided tour through a museum of virtue. (Ackerman 1984:11)3

Introduction

In the introduction to his magisterial American Judaism: A History (2004a), Jonathan Sarna recalls the skepticism with which his choice of a field of study was initially greeted at the beginning of his career. At that time, the very idea of studying American Jewish history in a sustained and disciplined manner was hard for many to imagine. Sarna overcame the skepticism, and the field has flourished, demonstrating its validity and vitality alongside other fields of Jewish history and alongside other aspects of American religious and social history as well.

But the subject of the present inquiry is not the question of whether American Jewish history is itself a worthy subject, whether scholars ought to spend their time on research and whether philanthropists ought to endow chairs. Instead, the question at hand is an educational one: why is American Jewish history worthy of being taught? And what purpose should such teaching serve? Philosophical questions such as these are important because topics of study are not self-justifying, and asking the questions – questions that must be pursued through conceptual inquiry, rather than empirical inquiry – enables one to examine assumptions while working out ideas that may inform practice. The focus on teaching, in particular, sharpens the questions, because the educational context compels us to make choices among many legitimate options. So while historians might be tempted to defend the importance of American Jewish history in terms of the depth of the scholarship and the historical significance of its conclusions, educators must focus on how such the subject will contribute to larger educational goals.4

But educational goals for whom? In order to generate the kind of philosophical defense that can inform practice, a curricular justification cannot operate at the most abstract levels. Instead, a curricular justification must consider particular contexts – particular students in particular settings. In this paper, the particular students that I have in mind are American Jews, and the particular settings that I have in mind are two: Jewish educational settings, and university settings. These two settings

---

1 I wish to acknowledge comments and contributions from Miriam Heller Stern, Ben Jacobs, Jonathan Krasner, Joe Reimer, Jonathan Sarna, and Israel Scheffler, not all of which I was wise enough to accept.
2 I am grateful to Jonathan Krasner for providing this citation.
4 I do not mean to suggest that the questions of historical significance are unrelated to educational questions, which I do not in fact believe. For the present purposes, however, I am focusing on the latter at the expense of the former.
are certainly not equivalent, but part of my argument is that they have or should have more in common than most practitioners in either setting typically assume.

Thus, the question is: why teach American Jewish history to American Jews in either Jewish schools or universities? And when the question is asked in this way, the inherent connection between the subject and the student becomes apparent. American Jews are already in possession of a kind of story about their own past. To the extent that they recognize themselves as American Jews, they possess some self-understanding, some account of themselves that connects to a larger account of this particular group of people. That story, one might say, is constitutive of their identities as American Jews. If that’s the case, then the teaching of American Jewish history begins to look not so much like the transmission of an objective historical account but rather like a process of identity development, a process in which the engagement with historical material serves the purpose of nurturing or fostering a particular kind of identity.

To clarify, the notion of identity that is being used here is not a matter of mere identification. For the purposes of the present argument, it is not enough for one to consider oneself merely Jewish by birth, and not even enough for one to have a kind of inert knowledge of one’s genealogy. Instead, the kinds of American Jews under consideration have, in addition to genealogy, some commitment to the future of Judaism or the Jewish people. At the minimum, they must consider their own personal narrative as part of that larger narrative, not only in terms of its past but also – in some sense – as part of its future. What does “in some sense” mean? It means, simply, that there is no intended prescription here about the right way to be Jewish, or about the future of Judaism looking exactly like its past. All that is required, for the present purposes, is a minimal commitment to being Jewish as an affirmative choice rather than an empirical but vestigial fact, a commitment to Judaism as an ongoing story rather than merely a closed chapter. And if such a minimal commitment is present, I claim, then the encounter with Jewish history cannot help but affect how one understands oneself and one’s place in that story.

This kind of formulation may well raise red flags for historians and history educators alike, because the introduction of personal identity may seem to compromise our commitments to critical and rigorous historiography. Indeed, historians often define their academic discipline in direct contrast with the kind of uncritical identity-development that is supposedly the purview of families and religions. David Lowenthal, an acute observer of popular pre-occupations with the past, calls this the tension between ‘history’ and ‘heritage’:

The historian … seeks to convey a past consensually known, open to inspection and proof, continually revised and eroded as time and hindsight outdate its truth. The heritage fashioner … seeks to design a past that will fix the identity and enhance the well-being of some chosen individual or folk. (Lowenthal 1998: xi)

The implication here is that for historians to engage in fixing identity or enhancing well-being of some chosen individual or folk is to violate the bounds of the discipline.

To students of Jewish history, Lowenthal’s comments will resonate with those of another acute observer of history, Yosef Yerushalmi, who famously distinguished between Jewish history and Jewish memory – and launched scholarly discourse on their relationship – in his Zakhor. Towards the end of that essay, Yerushalmi argues that

memory and modern historiography stand, by their very nature, in radically different relations to the past. The latter represents, not an attempt at a restoration of memory,

5 Compare Jonathan Sarna’s observation about historians of American Jewry: “We unconsciously think that it wouldn’t be a bad thing for if [American Jewry] continued into the future… We have a sense that somehow this community should continue…” (Sarna 2000: 5). I will return to his observations at the end of this paper.
but a truly new kind of recollection... [The historian] constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact. Moreover... he seeks ultimately to recover a total past... All these features cut against the grain of collective memory which... is drastically selective. (Yerushalmi 1989: 94)

Memory is selective, uncritical, and (in the case of collective memory) generated by the group to serve some purpose. History, on the other hand, avoids no topic and no episode and subjects all to the same scrutiny; it serves no purpose other than truth.

But for those engaged in the practice and teaching of American Jewish history, is this sufficient? To be sure, one must be sensitive to the abuses of history at the hands of uncritical cheerleaders, and those who are involved with educational institutions are doubtless familiar with instances of this: the celebration of ‘important’ Jews at every moment of American history without consideration of their significance in the larger American narrative or alternatively without consideration of the significance (to them or to history) of their Jewish lineage, or the elevation of matters of Jewish concern such as anti-Semitism and immigration policy beyond their appropriate scale, or the discovery of timeless and essential positive Jewish values or messages of Jewish history. As Jonathan Sarna writes, “we all know that some have written the past to make themselves or their ancestors more significant and saintly than they could possibly have been” (Sarna 1995:78). When one encounters sanguine proclamations such as Jacob Golub’s words in the first epigraph to this paper, that the study of history will contribute to a “wholesome Jewish world outlook” and “will go far in saving our children from the danger of complexes,” one ought to be at least skeptical if not downright dismissive. Walter Ackerman’s phrase in the second epigraph is exquisite: such approaches result in “a guided tour through a museum of virtue,” in which the museum-going tourist is quite distant from the actually experience of historical interpretation. And Joel Gereboff confirms that such approaches were all too common in the textbooks and curricula of the middle and late twentieth century (Gereboff 1997).

But the issue is not so simply dealt with. Lowenthal claims that history and heritage have entirely distinct purposes. Yerushalmi waves a dismissive hand at those who would employ history on behalf of communal or individual identity. But when one considers the question of why teach American Jewish history to American Jews, the connection to identity seems unavoidable. This is not to say that the only justification for the study of American Jewish history is its role in the formation of identity. There are other arguments, too – for example, about the significance of the American Jewish experience as an experimental situation of Judaism in an open society. But surely among the reasons to believe in the importance of American Jewish history – the reason that American Jews, at the very least, ought to know something about it – is that it is their history, their story, the story that makes sense of who they are and how they came to be the way they are, and perhaps too the story that shapes the options that they presently encounter. Allegiance to academic standards of historiography notwithstanding, one cannot simply dismiss Jewish history as irrelevant to Jewish identity.

What is necessary, therefore, is a different way to think about the connection between history and identity – a way that clarifies to historians how history can serve identity in a legitimate way while also encouraging educators to uphold the highest standards of critical historiography. In what follows, I will approach the topic by looking elsewhere, to general philosophy of education, where the parallel issue involves the study of history for the purpose of promoting patriotic loyalty. Here, too, some are concerned about the dangers of abandoning the critical standards of the discipline, particularly in favor of the promotion of a sentiment that may be considered problematic. But others believe that patriotism is a worthy educational goal, and that the study of history is a legitimate means to that goal. Among the latter are two theorists, William Galston and Eamonn Callan, to whose work I will now turn.6

---

6 I have written about Galston and Callan at greater length elsewhere (Levisohn 2003), although without consideration of the applications to the teaching of Jewish history.
Analyzing Sentimental History

In a widely cited 1989 article entitled "Civic Education in the Liberal State," William Galston argues that civic education cannot tolerate accounts of its institutions and central figures that are based on rigorous, critical historical research. Instead, civic education "requires a more noble, moralizing history: a pantheon of heroes who confer legitimacy on central institutions and constitute worthy objects of emulation." (Galston 1989:471) Talk of a pantheon of heroes and a noble history may seem naïve and hopelessly parochial, but Galston is neither. Nor does he approach the question of civic education from the conservative fringe. Instead, Galston is articulating, with admirable philosophical consistency, the apparent consequences of an intuition that is commonly held about the habituation of virtues in young children. That intuition holds that children must be taught right from wrong prior to the development of a capacity to reason about right and wrong. Moral education cannot and should not be deferred until the point that we can convince children using rational arguments. If so, then it seems to follow that the means that one uses, at an early age, may be irrational, or at least a-rational. And not just the means but indeed the content of our moral or civic education must be appropriate to the age of the child. Thus, one may and must inculcate certain habits or commitments in children regardless of whether those habits and commitments withstand the light of mature reason.

In Galston’s case, it is clear that the pantheon of heroes is populated by the Founders of the United States, because the commitments that he seeks to foster are civic commitments, loyalty to the institutions of America and to its ideals. These institutions and these ideals are so important, he believes – and we are presently doing such a poor job of fostering affection for them – that it is legitimate to compromise on truth in order to support them. To apply his argument to the case of American Jewish history, the cost-benefit analysis is different but no less straightforward: loyalty to Judaism and the Jewish people may be sufficiently important that some are willing to tolerate a celebratory historiography – and not just to tolerate it, but indeed to mandate it.

Indeed, precisely this position was endorsed by the noted Hebraist and educator William Chomsky in the 1950s, when he argued that we should have no compunction about teaching Bible stories to children as historical truth.

The emotional deposit left by an effective story will in itself serve to fortify the young child and to cushion him against the shock of discovering the ‘fictitious’ character of the story later on. (Chomsky 1956: 183-4)

In other words: whatever harm may later come to the child, when he discovers that his teachers were not exactly honest with him in portraying literary or religious texts as historical truths that they themselves did not believe, is more than offset by the emotional benefit that accrues in the short term.

What is wrong with this approach? It seems intuitively troubling to endorse “moralizing history” or “fictitious” stories, but how can the basis for the concern be articulated? In the fifth chapter

---

7 In fact, Galston is a respected political theorist who situates himself within, while also challenging and extending, the liberal tradition. Currently director of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland, he has served in advisory capacities to the campaigns of Walter Mondale, John Anderson, and Al Gore, and served as Deputy Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy in the first Clinton administration. Setting biography aside, the philosophical point is this: he does not demand a conservative allegiance to our political arrangements as they presently stand, but rather insists that even a liberal approach requires allegiance – e.g., to the ideals that stand behind present arrangements and to which they may be held accountable.

8 Note that the a-rationality of the education, in this instance, refers to the absence of reasons that are provided to the child. This is not to say that the teacher or parent is acting irrationally or a-rationally; she may well have good reasons for what she is doing. But there is no particular reason to think that those reasons, the reasons she would introduce to defend her actions if asked to do so, are reasons that ought to be communicated to the child to motivate his behavior or belief. My thanks to Israel Scheffler for clarifying this point.

of Creating Citizens (1997), philosopher of education Eamonn Callan rejects Galston’s approach on the basis of an argument that distinguishes between different kinds of emotions. Some emotions, he claims, are legitimate, and some are not.

There are some emotions [that] we earn the right to feel with the consequence that they are truly our own – emotions we have paid for, so to speak, in thought and experience – and others that have in some way been illicitly appropriated or aroused so that they do not belong to us in [any] but the shallowest sense. (1989:103)

Legitimate emotions are those emotions that we have a right to feel – we’ve earned them, we’ve paid for them – and when we encounter them in others, we acknowledge their right to feel them too. Other emotions, on the other hand, are illegitimate because we have no right to feel them, and when we encounter them in others, we sense that they are unearned, unpaid-for, held for thin reasons or for no reasons at all.

We consider people who hold emotions in this way to be sentimental, and thus Callan’s term for the phenomenon is sentimentalism.10 Emotions are typically considered to be private, subjective, unevaluable on moral or epistemic criteria. But on this analysis, holding emotions – specifically, emotions of loyalty or commitment – without sufficient cognitive or experiential justification constitutes the emotional malady of sentimentalism. And for the present purposes, in considering the specific emotion of loyalty to a minority ethnic or religious group, or to the religion itself, such unjustified emotions might be recognized as a kind of parochialism. Two people might hold similar views about and commitments towards the United States, but we might consider one person justified in holding those views and commitments while the other, we might claim, is merely sentimental. Similarly, two people might hold similar views about and commitments towards Judaism, but we might consider one person justified in holding those views and commitments while the other, we might claim, is overly parochial. Parochialism represents the kind of shallowness of thought and experience, in the minority-group context, that sentimentalism represents in general.

But what exactly is this process of earning one’s emotions in thought and experience? To flesh this out, consider Alasdair MacIntyre’s by-now-familiar insight that “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (MacIntyre 1981:216) This kind of situating of one’s narrative within a larger narrative is what it means to possess a particular moral identity. That moral identity, that particular moral identity, determines moral demands. If I see myself as a professor, I have certain moral obligations that flow from that self-understanding (that is, that flow from my best understanding of what responsibilities that profession entails). Likewise, if I see myself as an American or as a Jew, I have certain obligations that flow from that self-understanding, however I construct it, including a kind of obligation of loyalty. But those obligations are legitimate only if the story itself is legitimate in two senses: first, in the sense of legitimately being my story; and second (and for our purposes more importantly), in the sense of being an intellectually defensible historical narrative.11 If the story is not legitimate, on the other hand, then my moral identity is a mere fantasy – and the emotions of loyalty that are associated with it lose their legitimacy as well.

Thus, for example, if I intentionally whitewash the history of my nation – if I ignore the moral lapses and fixate exclusively on the justice and rightness of its actions and its representatives – then I have concocted a false narrative. Likewise, if I deliberately search for Jewish heroes in the American past, ignoring or avoiding the question of their historical significance – if I offer only

---

10 Callan cites Oscar Wilde for this insight.

11 Whether or not the story is accurate in every detail is not significant, of course, but the claim here is that it is possible to misconstrue the basic trajectory of the narrative. Naturally, this claim – which amounts to a rejection of the all-too-common view that narratives are neither true nor false – requires more elaboration than is possible here.
a "guided tour through a museum of virtue," in Ackerman's words - then I have constructed an inaccurate account. To clarify, the issue here is not about the difference between the way that subjects are taught to eighteen year olds and the way that they are taught to eight year olds. The kinds of age-appropriate adjustments that one makes in order to represent subjects to children are inevitable, and no different than the adjustments that one must always make in order to communicate to a particular audience with particular preconceptions and particular abilities to assimilate new ideas. Spiraling a curriculum is not the same thing as the deliberate construction of false narratives that Galston endorses. But telling a false narrative is like paying for an emotion with a forged check or with counterfeit money. In other words, it is not paying for the emotion at all; it is sentimentalism. Or, we might equally say, it is parochialism.

What, however, is the educational problem with sentimentalism or parochialism? To this point, I have assigned labels with derogatory connotations, but I haven't explained why these phenomena ought to be of concern to us in educational settings. Even if one accepts Callan's insight about the psychology of paying for emotions - even if one notices that emotions are not, actually, as unevaluable as they might have seemed at first - why should this admittedly problematic character trait determine what to teach and how? A link needs to be established here, between the negative connotation of sentimentalism and parochialism, on the one hand, and educational desiderata on the other.

In pursuing this question, Callan focuses on political arguments, but those political arguments are better understood in epistemological terms, so I will reformulate them in that way. The most pervasive misrepresentation in the stories that sentimental patriots tell is the "fiction of moral purity." This dovetails with Galston's reference to a "pantheon of heroes": one easily imagines a false story in which, for example, the Founders did no wrong, indeed could do no wrong. In the Jewish historical context, one easily imagines a false story in which noteworthy Jews are uniformly heroic, and in which only these types populate Jewish history. Sentimentalism and parochialism are sustained by such fictions. But - and this is the key insight - such fictions generate three further problems, three "moral liabilities" (Callan 1997:106), that are educationally harmful.

First, telling a story of moral purity tends to "blind us to the possible values that were rejected in the choices not taken" (1997:107) by the moral exemplars in question. Callan's evocative term for this liability is the "constitution of the historical imagination": students come to see the ways things were and are as the only way they could have been and therefore the way they must be, turning a blind eye to alternative possibilities either then or now. Second, telling a story of moral purity about one person or institution tends to lead to an expansion of such uncritical stories, in effect promoting a kind of "coarseness of vision" in our students in which they are unable to evaluate political or other institutions critically. Third, telling a story of moral purity tends to result in the simplistic equation of innovation with treachery, such that students are disabled from evaluating new ideas for the degree to which they represent progress towards ideals or principles, on the one hand, or falling away from ideals and principles, on the other.

In each of these situations, the promotion of fictions of moral purity leads, perhaps inevitably, towards deleterious effects on the character of students - not just on their moral character, but on their intellectual character, on their habits of mind. The problem with Galston-type sentimentalism - the problem with teaching a "noble, moralizing history" - is that it cannot avoid crippling the qualities

---

12 See Levisohn 2003 for an elaboration of this argument.
13 Each of these moral liabilities, as the reader will soon see, is couched in probabilistic terms: fictions of moral purity tend to lead to x, y, and z. Of course, these claims are empirical, not philosophical. This is not to say that empirical research will settle the matter in clear and unequivocal terms, but it is to say that empirical research - on the ways, for example, that historical sentimentalism manifests itself in the constitution of the historical imagination - would illuminate the phenomenon beyond the philosophical abstractions supplied here. In general, we do not yet have a tradition of empirical research in the teaching and learning of history with enough historiographical sensitivity and nuance to be able to approach such questions.
of critical inquiry. Similarly, the discomfort with parochialism in the teaching of Jewish history stems from its corrosive effects on intellectual character. A common naive picture holds that we can tell our children lies now, and tell them truths later. Once we embark on the path of deliberate misrepresentation, however, we put our deepest educational aspirations at risk.

**Inquiry into “What is Best”**

But perhaps we don’t all share the belief in fostering the qualities of critical inquiry. Or perhaps, even if we agree that critical inquiry is good in principle, we feel that it must compete with other values. In that situation, if we are faced with a dichotomy of critical history versus sentimental history, or history versus heritage, or Jewish history versus Jewish memory, Galston’s prescription may seem like the least-bad option. We may even agree that Callan is right about the corrosive effects of adopting a sentimental or parochial approach to the story of American Jews and Judaism – but conclude that the virtue of supporting students’ identity as American Jews is worth the sacrifice. What is necessary, therefore, is not just a negative argument about sentimentalism, but a positive argument on behalf of an alternative.14

For the purposes of civic education, Callan develops such an alternative by asking a different kind of question about the past, what he calls in one place

[a] melding of powerful emotion and critical acuity [that] depends on a certain way of looking at the past, a way that is both emotionally generous and imaginative.

(Callan 1997:118)

One can ask an historical question that doesn’t avert its eyes from unpleasant facts, even as the question itself nurtures patriotic emotions. Asking and seeking to answer this question need not entail a sacrifice of critical historical inquiry on behalf of patriotism, or vice versa. If we ask this question, we can develop a critical patriotism that is more flexible and resilient than the stubborn and sentimental belief that “my nation is best.” The sentimental belief takes the form of a propositional assertion; its rigidity is due to its inability to cope with disconfirming evidence. But in place of a commitment to the assertion of the superiority of one’s nation, Callan argues that we should instead commit ourselves to the question: what is the best of our political tradition?

Progressive educators will immediately recognize the power of framing a curriculum in terms of a question, an inquiry shared by students and teachers alike, rather than the transmission of a set of facts or even a pre-determined narrative. But beyond this general point, asking “what is best in this political tradition?” stands in opposition to a different kind of question, such as asking “what is dominant in this political tradition?” In Callan’s account, asking “what is dominant” is something like a disengaged, objective historical question.15 But asking “what is best” requires the interpreter of history to take a particular interpretive stance, to be engaged directly and more immediately with the object of historical inquiry. Asking “what is best” requires the ability to read one’s history generously and imaginatively, to try and discern the best of the actors in that history, and with a sensitivity to the historical context in which actions were taken or beliefs were held. It is both an expression of patriotism, and supportive of patriotic commitments.

---

14 Some historians might wonder, here, that the alternative seems obvious: we simply ought to teach the best (i.e., most evidently defensible) historical account available. But how do we determine which account to teach? The problem here is not one of adjudicating among contradictory accounts. Instead, the problem is how to select among the infinite non-contradictory, even complementary accounts. What’s the criterion of selection between cultural history, social history, or religious history? This problem relates back to the question with which we began: why teach American Jewish history in the first place?

15 “What is dominant” is disengaged in a relative sense; the inquirer need not identify personally with the nation the history of which she is investigating. But, as is commonly understood, to the extent that the inquirer always has, and cannot avoid having, particular interests that motivate the inquiry, no historian is ever disengaged absolutely. Engagement (sometimes called “bias”) is not the kind of thing that one should eliminate, because it is not the kind of thing that one can do without.
At the same time, exercising generosity and imagination does not entail whitewashing history; on the contrary, asking "what is best" only makes sense in the context of an awareness of the full picture. For example, the extent to which one understands the civil rights movement is in direct proportion to the extent to which one understands the depth of American racism and hostility towards the movement's accomplishments. Sarna, in writing on the question of "Why study American Jewish history?" rejects identity-formation as a compelling rationale, primarily because of its purported aversion to "unpleasant facts" (Sarna 2003:3), but the approach outlined here is not afraid of such facts. Engaging with the historical record in this way allows one to earn one's emotions of loyalty to the nation; the kind of interpretation that asks "what is best" avoids the Scylla of sentimentalism, on the one hand, and the Charybdis of nihilism, on the other. It allows for the possibility of relative moral impurity and does not collapse into mythologizing, while nevertheless fostering political allegiance.

Two Related Concerns about Callan

Immediately, some may question Callan's optimism about the fruits of historical research. He believes that a rigorous inquiry into the political history of one's nation can support a critical patriotism, so long as it begins from the question of "what is best." He acknowledges that the answer to that question may generate profound critique of present institutions, of course, but that critique will be rooted in the history and committed to it, rather than aloof from it. But what if there is no "best"? What if one adopts Callan's strategy but finds nothing of which to be proud, nothing upon which to build? What if the nation or state whose history is the object of inquiry is irredeemably evil? This, after all, is what motivates the standard concerns about patriotism in general: what if the entity to which we are urged to be loyal is not morally deserving of our loyalty?

This concern highlights the way in which the historian or history educator who pursues the question of "what is best" is committed to a preconception, namely, the prior belief that there is some "best" to be found. Callan's strategy requires the preconception that there is something redemptive in the story of the nation. But this is not a fatal flaw, not a bias in the problematic sense in which bias can and should be eliminated. After all, the alternative to a prior belief that there is some "best" is the belief that there is none, that there is nothing in the story worth telling. Or more precisely, there is nothing in the story that is worth telling in the engaged way, the emotionally generous and imaginative way, that Callan calls for, even if there may be something worth telling from some other, external perspective (for example, as an object lesson in the collapse of moral order). In the case of the kind of history that Callan has in mind, the idea that there is no "best" amounts to a preconception that the nation's history is overwhelmingly and irredeemably negative. Of course, that too is a preconception that the historian brings to the inquiry — and all we can ask is that each historian, the patriotic and the pessimistic, should be open to the evidence that she finds.16

A second concern with Callan's conception, however — a concern that emerges especially when one tries to apply his ideas to the case of American Jewish history — involves his focus on political history. This is not surprising, given his concern with patriotism, but it is certainly shortsighted. After all, history comes in different forms. And more particularly, even if one is concerned with patriotism, loyalty to one's nation need not only be fostered through an allegiance to its political story. One might foster such loyalty by developing a connection to the social history of the people, or to its literature and ideas. In the case of American Jewish history, a narrative of the best of the American Jewish political tradition lacks the clarity and directness of the general case of American

16 Some might wonder whether all historians fall into one of these two camps. Surely an historian can avoid both preconceptions, affirming in advance neither that there is some "best" nor that there is nothing of value to be retrieved? But while it is certainly true that historians will approach such matters in far more subtle ways than the ways sketched here, it is hard to see how the alternatives can be avoided. At a basic level, the historian must approach her subject with some sense that there's an important story to be told, that there's something significant about the history according to some criterion — whether that criterion is political, cultural, literary, socia, or religious. That criterion serves to pick out the "best" in that history as what is significant — or alternatively, it serves as the basis of an argument that there is nothing significant to be found here.
political history. So on the one hand, we understand well what it means to focus on the best and most hopeful aspects of the American political tradition, to look at that history through the lens of our moral and political ideals even as we scrupulously attend to the ways it has fallen short of those ideals. But what is the analogy in the specific case of American Jewish history?

These two points are related. Callan holds that the patriotic historian or history educator should pursue an inquiry into what is best in the political history of the nation, thereby fostering a critically-minded patriotic allegiance even as she avoids sentimentalism. But a closer analysis reveals that such an historian approaches her inquiry with not one but two preconceptions. The first is that there is some redemptive story to be told, that the inquiry will not be fruitless, that she will find something worthy of being called “the best of the political tradition” according to her present values. But the second is that the story that is worth telling is a political story, and that the political story is worth telling in two senses: first, in the sense that it is historically significant, and second, in the sense that it is potentially powerful in its impact upon her audience or students. Neither of these assumptions is debilitating, necessarily, but in each case, the historian must approach her inquiry open to the possibility of being proven wrong. There may be no best story because the political tradition is one of corruption and moral waste, with nothing redemptive to be found. And it may be the case it is not the political story that is worth telling but rather some other story altogether.

Such certainly seems to be the case in American Jewish history. When one tries to construct an account of what is historically significant in that story — what is significant to American Jews, now, and to American Jewish students, and to their identities and their futures — the primary candidates would seem to be aspects of social and cultural or religious history. One might, for example, construct an historical inquiry into the ideal of k’lal yisrael, the unity of and shared responsibility for the Jewish people. This would not simply be a feel-good story of the eternal presence of this virtue among the Jews. That is, one might pose the historical question, “what have been the best expressions of k’lal yisrael in American Jewish history,” a question that would also have to acknowledge and take account of the opposition to those expressions of k’lal yisrael due to interests of class and ethnicity as well as due to immigrant insecurity — the moments that stand as low points in that story. Or, one might observe that students tend to uphold a “lachrymose conception of Jewish history,” in Salo Baron’s phrase, in which case one might construct an historical inquiry into the ways in which American Jewish history subverts that conception. So one might ask the question, What is the best of the history of acceptance and integration within the American Jewish experience?, a question which would also have to take account of the moments of rejection and hostility.

Neither of these examples, or others that might be generated from the thoughtful consideration of the present condition of American Jewry and its intellectual and spiritual concerns, conform precisely to Callan’s straightforward model of “what is the best of the American political tradition.” But that need not trouble us, because the kind of engagement that Callan desires can be produced by different kinds of historical inquiry, depending on the particular setting. The implicit commitment that the historian or history teacher holds, when engaging in an inquiry into questions such as these, is that there is some “best,” that this is a story worth telling, that there is something powerful and redemptive to be found here. That is, once one sets up an inquiry in this way, once one discerns the right question to ask — or one of the right questions — one can (and should!) then be committed to critical historiography and yet find something inspiring and hopeful through which identities may be fostered and futures built.

17 But see Daniel Elazar’s argument on behalf of the teaching of the Jewish political tradition: it is “vital for Jews to rediscover the Jewish political tradition in order to pursue the Jewish vision and to root their institutions, whether the state of Israel or diaspora communities, more fully within it.” (Elazar 1998: 135) The rediscovery of the Jewish political tradition was, of course, Elazar’s life work. He notes, however, that in attempting to introduce a curriculum on the Jewish political tradition into a school setting, he encountered opposition — opposition that, he believes, “reflects the fact that for most American Jewish educators, Judaism is primarily a spiritual matter, not to be ’sullied’ by the difficult problems of politics and government” (1998: 137).
Indeed, if we return to Sarna’s recently published American Judaism: A History to which we referred at the outset, we might well understand the author to be doing exactly this. I should clarify that Sarna himself is somewhat skeptical about the role of identity-formation in the teaching of American Jewish history. He writes, for example, that the approach that I have taken in the present paper is “full of pitfalls,” and worries that it “encourages students to substitute their own values for those of the historical actors” (Sarna 2004b). This is a significant concern, to be sure. But at the same time, he surely believes that his own narrative of religious response and creativity in the face of the ever-present fear for the future of American Judaism is among the most important things for American Jews to know about their history. His history, he writes, is “a history that commands the attention of contemporary Jews, for American Judaism’s past ... sheds considerable light on its present-day challenges and its destiny” (Sarna 2004a, xvi). It is this belief that underwrites his selection of focus. And it is this attention to contemporary challenges that makes his deviations from scholarly orthodoxy particularly meaningful, such as his emphasis on the early, pre-1880 period in American Jewish history (rather than allowing population growth to dictate historiographical significance) and his attention to “revivals” and “awakenings” (rather than hewing to the tired linear histories of decline into assimilation).

In fact, in his conclusion, Sarna speaks directly to the present – not, to be sure, only to contemporary American Jews, but that audience is quite explicitly foremost in his mind. “Regularly,” he writes,

American Jews hear ... that Judaism in America is doomed.... But history, as we have seen, suggests another possibility: that today, as so often before, American Jews will find creative ways to maintain and revitalize American Judaism. (Sarna 2004a: 374)

It therefore seems entirely reasonable to interpret his historiographical product as an effort to pose and answer a “what is best” kind of question, a question something like this: what have been the best, most creative and most enduring responses to the perennial fear for the future of American Judaism? That question emerges from his understanding of the present condition of American Judaism and of its past; the inquiry is one that is guided, we might say, by the emotions of generosity and imagination to which Callan referred, while affirming the value of a critical perspective and clearly rejecting mythologizing or hagiography.

Thus, American Jewish history that is pursued on behalf of the construction of the identities of American Jews need not lapse into sentimental celebrations of the greatness of the contribution of Jews to America or disproportionate emphases on the involvement of American Jewish heroes. It need not endorse naïve and ahistorical accounts of a timeless positive Jewish essence. Instead, it ought to carefully consider what aspects of that history are most salient to contemporary Jewish identities, and establish its criteria of significance on that basis. From that point, it ought to pursue its critical historiography with free rein, content in the knowledge that the inquiry itself is an act of engagement and will contribute to critical commitment.

Conclusion

Building on Callan’s critique of Galston and his development of an alternative approach to history education on behalf of patriotic commitment, I have argued that one can avoid the dilemma of critical history or sentimentalism, history or heritage, Jewish history or Jewish memory. One can study and teach American Jewish history towards the goal of fostering American Jewish identity, while avoiding parochialism, by employing criteria of significance on the basis of our best understanding of the present and future of that identity. By way of conclusion, however, let me add three qualifications to what I have argued to this point.

The first qualification is that the question of “what is best” need not be limited to what is
typically understood to be a success or achievement.\textsuperscript{18} This is really just to repeat the distinction between “what is best” and “what is dominant.” Just as one need not hesitate to teach about pre-Civil War Abolitionism – a movement which was not dominant but which, in retrospect, is considered particularly significant both historically and morally – so too one need not hesitate to consider failures or shortcomings of a particular group. Jurgen Habermas’ approach to the history of Nazism is instructive here: for him, the period of 1933-1945 represents the failure that underwrites the subsequent political and moral legitimacy of German constitutionalism. It may be that the aspect of one’s past that is redemptive, that enables one to see oneself as having a future, is precisely a history of failure – assuming, that is, that the recognition of failure can be understood to represent an overcoming of it, a process of growth in which one learns from the mistakes of the past. If, for example, “what is best” in the history of the American Jewish community is its efforts on behalf of imperiled Jewish communities elsewhere, one need not turn a blind eye to the moments in which those efforts were too weak or ineffectual, or where they were corrupted by political considerations. The history of activism that one tells, if one chooses to do so, need not be a history only of success.

A second qualification, related to the first, has to do with the very idea of critical history. In American Jewish history as in other sub-fields, the educational purposes are sometimes and even often served by teaching more than one account, more than one narrative. Throughout this paper I have referred to the narrative of “what is best,” the account or story, but teaching multiple accounts allows one to employ a comparative method, to foster better and deeper understanding of the claims that each interpretation makes by comparison with the alternatives. Note, however, that this is not an argument in response to the epistemological quandary of determining which narrative to teach. After all, selecting two narratives, from among the many available accounts, is only marginally more defensible than selecting just one. Rather, the point is that one may frequently teach multiple narratives with a particular end in view. If one does wish to make the question of American Jewish activism on behalf of other Jewish communities a central focus, that goal might (perhaps) be better served by presenting two competing accounts of that history – two mature, nuanced accounts whose fundamental interpretations of the evidence differ in profound ways. To be sure, teaching multiple accounts means giving up a degree of control on what students know (it’s harder to ask multiple choice questions on a test when there are multiple answers!) but educators are only tenuously in control of that anyway.

The third and final qualification – and some readers have surely been wondering about this all along – returns us to the question of educational settings. At the outset, I claimed that the arguments that I am employing apply to the teaching of American Jewish history to American Jews in each of the two settings, university classrooms as well as Jewish educational environments. I did so in order to subvert (what I perceive to be) the assumed bifurcation into history as it is taught in Jewish educational settings and history as it is taught in universities. But this is only partly accurate. That is, the basic approach defended here – an approach which acknowledges and embraces the role of the study of the history of one’s own nation on one’s identity, while defending critical historiographical standards – is an approach that may be applied in both settings, but the way that it is applied must certainly take those settings into account. Some of the constructions of inquiries into “what is best” that are appropriate for a Jewish educational setting are not necessarily appropriate for a university setting.

On the other hand, the matter of appropriateness is not as straightforward as some might think; it is certainly more complicated than simply affirming identity in one setting and avoiding identity altogether in the other. Consider, for example, the inquiry generated by the question, “what have been the best expressions of k’lal yisrael in American Jewish history,” which seems to cross the line into an endorsement of specific Jewish values that is out of place in a university setting. And yet, one can imagine a course in American Jewish history that focuses on the ways in which

\textsuperscript{18} I appreciate Jonathan Krasner’s help in articulating this point.
Jews, as an immigrant community, have maintained (or have not maintained) bonds of loyalty across national boundaries. When re-described in that way, the parochialism of k’lal yisrael is moderated by a legitimate interest in the interactions of minority groups within majority cultures and the strains that such interactions place on intra-minority relationships. There is no way to separate the purely academic interest in that question (an interest which is an expression of belief, implicitly or explicitly, that this issue is significant not merely as a matter of the historical record but as a matter of contemporary concern) from the interest in the question as a matter of the present identities of these particular American Jewish students.

But of course, in university settings, one cannot and should not assume that one’s students are all Jewish; one typically has both Jews and non-Jews sitting side-by-side in one’s courses, and in fact one often does not know who is what. Indeed, this is one of the particular benefits of university Jewish studies, where Jews must articulate beliefs and ideas in ways that are intelligible to outsiders. And thus, what about teaching American Jewish history to non-Jews? This simple fact seems rather dramatically to call the whole enterprise into question: how can it be that we would be teaching the same subject in two radically different ways, in effect teaching two different histories to two different groups of people? How could a justification for the teaching of American Jewish history rest on a commitment to the fostering of Jewish identity?

There are two complementary points to be made in response. The first point is that, while we often indeed do not know who our students are, we ought not to make a virtue out of necessity. It may be impossible to learn about the backgrounds of each of the students sitting in a lecture hall, but surely knowing more about the students is better than knowing less, and surely too we often resort to quick-and-dirty judgments about those backgrounds. We may ask for a show of hands of who has studied the subject before; we may rely on visual cues; we may develop over time a sense of the students in particular institutions. In ideal circumstances, on the other hand, we would have sufficient contact with each student to know, with a great deal of precision, how much prior knowledge she possesses and what kind of knowledge that is, what kinds of family and life experiences she has had that may relate to the subject at hand, what she believes the purpose of studying the subject is and what she hopes to gain from it, and on an ongoing basis, what sense she is making of the subject. The fact that we rarely if ever have the time or opportunity to learn all these things is perfectly understandable, but from a pedagogic perspective, unfortunate.

So while it’s true that we often do not know about the identities of our students, under ideal circumstances we should. But beyond this point, there’s another point to be made. It is of course correct that fostering Jewish identity is out of place when teaching American Jewish history to non-Jews, but this is just to say that in those cases some other justification must play a role — and that justification, too, will be bound up in criteria of significance. For example, I might claim that non-Jewish Americans ought to study American Jewish history the better to understand themselves as Americans, as participants in a grand experiment of immigration and acculturation and national-cultural fluidity. (Or, more modestly, that they will benefit from such study or perhaps simply enjoy it in those terms.) Something quite analogous is often claimed about African-American history: non-African-Americans ought to study that history in order to better understand themselves as Americans including, of course, the role of race in the story of their nation.

Turning to Sarna one last time, consider the following honest observations from a panel discussion on the teaching of American Jewish history. Sarna notes that American Jewish historians are not neutral about the American Jewish community (whatever “neutrality” might mean). Instead, “many of us start with a positive attitude towards America as a center for Jewry” (2000:4). Furthermore, “we have a sense that somehow this community should continue” (p. 5). The attitude that he describes is nothing other than the presence of preconceptions – but preconceptions that, he affirms, need not disable critical scholarship. On the contrary, they enable the historian to frame the historical inquiry.

And in terms of the students whom he teaches, Sarna writes that “nobody teaching in the
university would assume that they ought to be teaching Jewish values” (p. 34). But the matter is not so simple.

I have to admit, however, [that] I know that many of our students are taking American Jewish history classes in search of Jewish identity. There’s no doubt about it. And even though I welcome anybody, and I don’t necessarily teach to American Jewish identity, I’m well aware that they are searching for it, and that is important, therefore, in what I’m presenting... I think they want to know where do they fit in in American history. (p. 36).

The option to ignore this background – who his students are and what their experiences are – is available, but Sarna is too honest to do so. His awareness of their identities becomes pedagogically significant, even as he is also ethically and intellectually bound to accommodate students with other identities and other experiences, and ethically and intellectually bound to uphold the critical standards of the university. One may not “teach to ... identity,” but one should not disregard the importance of those identities.

The general point is this: the subjects that we teach, and the particular ways that we choose to teach them, are not justified in abstract terms (e.g., by their status as knowledge) but in concrete, specific terms, in terms of actual students and the projected (positive) impact on those students of the particular educational encounter that we propose. The teaching of American Jewish history to American Jews is simply a case in point. When we approach our subject, any subject, we ought to be aware of the potential impact that that subject has on the identities of the students. And in the case of teaching American Jewish history to American Jews, we cannot avoid the fact that students encounter an educational experience that is directly relevant to their identities, in Jewish educational settings and university settings alike. We need not be ethnic cheerleaders, and we need not abandon our critical perspectives. But as we select the criteria of historiographical significance that guide our study and our teaching, we ought to do so in light of our best judgments about those identities and what will lead to their healthy futures.

References


