The Jewish history curriculum in American Jewish schools has long centered on matters of instruction more than cognition, transmission more than application, and common heritage more than individual growth. Jewish educators mainly have been intent on inculcating positive Jewish identity in students by transmitting the rich legacy of the Jews, with the hope that Jewish cultural literacy, identification with past Jewish glories and travails, and strong Jewish pride, together will develop lasting Jewish affinities among the rising generation. As a result, Jewish history education has been a rather heavy-handed affair. When the American Jewish education enterprise was geared toward “identity and continuity” as its primary outcomes, as was the case through the latter part of the 20th century, this approach to Jewish history instruction seemed perfectly reasonable to teachers and students alike. Teachers aimed stories about the founding and survival of the Jewish state, the destruction and rebirth of world Jewry, and the rags-to-riches origins of American Jewry, directly at their students’ kishkes, and felt rewarded when these students made aliyah, proclaimed “Never again!,” and married Jewish classmates. However, new 21st century realities of Jewish life, which naturally impinge on Jewish educational activities, suggest new priorities and opportunities for teaching and learning Jewish history going forward.

This chapter takes as its starting point some of the new 21st century circumstances—including the changing nature of Jewish identification in the post-everything (post-modern, post-ethnic, post-denominational, etc.) age, the retreat from identity and continuity as singular aims of Jewish education, the democratization of Jewish learning opportunities, the new emphasis on informal and experiential Jewish education activities, and increased interest among professional educators in learning sciences and discipline-based skills—and posits that Jewish history education has the potential to grow in innovative and exciting directions, with a new set of orientations to supplement those that have been postulated before (see Jacobs & Shem-Tov, 2011). It also takes into consideration how educators might inspire today’s students to
understand, care about, and confront historical and contemporary Jewish problems for the sake of motivating participation in Jewish life.

The chapter is organized loosely around three commonplaces of the curriculum: subject matter, learning, and teaching. I explore each of these areas with reference to recent research, professional activities, policy considerations, and curriculum materials from the fields of history and social studies education generally, as well as American Jewish education specifically. In each segment, I address implications for curriculum reform.

With regard to subject matter, I am interested in what historical and contemporary issues are—or should be—of particular concern to Jewish history curriculum stakeholders (learners, teachers, parents, community, scholars) nowadays, including Israel, Jewish culture, difficult and traumatic history, the histories of marginalized groups, globalization, and controversial issues. I argue that 21st century sensibilities necessitate a shift away from the inevitable focus on ancient Jewish history as the starting point for the chronological organization of the curriculum to a focus on contemporary issues as the starting point for the conceptual organization of the curriculum. I further argue that Jewish social studies has the potential to serve as the central organizing framework for the entire Judaic studies curriculum. I make a claim for the use of Jewish historical documents as a means of text study.

With regard to learning, I am interested in research on how students interpret historical evidence, construct historical understanding, and develop historical consciousness and empathy. Relatedly, I am interested in recommendations for structuring historical learning, such as developing skills in historical inquiry, reading and writing, and critical thinking, that can enhance the educational value of the Jewish history curriculum in schools. In the end, I propose aims and methods for Jewish history education that go beyond parochial concerns for “identity and continuity” and toward broader outcomes that encourage cognitive and emotional development within a rooted but intercultural frame (see Nordgren & Johansson, 2015). Moreover, I suggest how Jewish history education can become increasingly democratized and thereby empowering when entrusted in the hands of its students.
With respect to teaching, I am interested in the capacity of non-school based modes and contexts for teaching Jewish history, including heritage travel, museums, and mobile interactive games, to drive the use-of-Jewish-history forward. I am also interested in the proliferation of instructional materials now available to teachers of Jewish history in formal and informal settings, including online archives and curriculum toolkits. Last, I discuss how teachers can apply general social studies education frameworks, such as deliberation, decision-making, and service learning, to the project of Jewish citizenship education. My goal in this section is to suggest that Jewish history education is not only a worthwhile pursuit for its own sake, but also for the sake of developing Jewish historical culture and Jewish civic dispositions.

The final segment of this chapter addresses the importance of teacher education. Little has been written about the professional preparation of Jewish history teachers, perhaps because it is such a niche pursuit or because Jewish history is hardly taught in primary and secondary schools in the first place. In this section, I argue that Jewish teacher education programs focused on Jewish history, culture, and civic education have the potential to prepare all Jewish educators in tune with the 21st century Jewish zeitgeist. Indeed, these educators can be the vanguard of Jewish education on the American scene going forward.

Reference List (in formation)

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