What’s the use of Jewish History for American Jews?
— the question of objectives in adult Jewish education

David E. Kaufman

The thesis underlying this paper (and this conference) is the notion that Jewish history is good for the Jews. By “Jewish history” I mean Jewish historical understanding, i.e., a broader and more detailed historical knowledge, a sharper and more critical historical thinking, and a higher and more sophisticated historical consciousness of the Jewish experience—all of which can be beneficial to American Jews and American Jewish life in significant ways. But what are those benefits? What, after all, is the purpose of studying and teaching Jewish history in contemporary Jewish life? The learners I have in mind are adult American Jews, though certainly the question is relevant to younger ages as well, especially high school and college-aged students. The milieus in which I imagine Jewish history education taking place range from the formal setting of the adult education classroom to the informal settings of Jewish museums and cultural events—one arena I am especially interested in examining is the sphere of synagogue (adult) education, for reasons to be spelled out below. The teachers in this vision will necessarily have to be trained in both general and Jewish academic history, and ideally they ought to resonate to the programmatic objectives I will lay out. Finally, and perhaps most critically, the philanthropic establishment must be invested (pun intended) in such a program as well. Imagine, for example, if a communal commitment equivalent to the Birthright Israel initiative were made to the funding and support of Jewish history education on the college campus, JCC event space, and/or synagogue sanctuary. But in order to bring about more engaged learners, more qualified teachers, and more invested communal institutions, we need to start with the fundamental question of educational objectives—what’s the use of Jewish history?

I intend to answer that question in two ways. The first part of my paper will survey the modern Jewish experience of the past two centuries for its various applications of Jewish historical understanding. As Shmuel Feiner writes in his 2002 monograph Haskalah and History: “Every social, cultural, and political trend that has developed in modern Jewish history has been accompanied by a distinctive sense of the past, which supports the collective identity, ideology, and activity of its advocates and justifies them to themselves, contemporary Jewish society, and history.” Feiner’s suggestion that every aspect of Jewish modernity has rested upon some form of historical consciousness is the starting point for this study and directly informs part one. Part two will apply the insight to American Jewish life today. For if in fact the great changes and advances of the modern Jewish period were all dependent upon historical thinking, then the same ought to be applicable to contemporary American Jewry and its various tensions and challenges. If Jewish history provided ideological legitimation and cultural resolution in the past, then why not today as well? My research, therefore, will focus on the application of Jewish history education to the social divides and intellectual dilemmas currently characterizing American Jewish life, looking especially at those American Jews characterized by Cohen & Eisen [The Jew Within] as “the moderately affiliated,” that is, the broad center of the American Jewish population. It is this majority in the “middle” that sociologists tell us is currently “shrinking”—not declining numerically so much as decreasing in Jewish engagement—and it is this group which may have the most to gain from Jewish history education.
I. Other historians before me have surveyed ideologies of Jewish history in the modern Jewish experience. Michael Meyer’s anthology *Ideas of Jewish History*, Lucy Dawidowicz’s essay “What’s the Use of Jewish History?,” and Chazan and Jacobs’ article “Jewish History from the Academy to the Schools: Bridging the Gap” are some useful examples. My own brief survey will focus on the three major movements of Jewish modernity: Enlightenment, Emancipation, and Jewish Nationalism. In the first case, Jewish historical understanding underlay the *Haskalah*, the Jewish version of the Enlightenment’s challenge to traditional religion. *Wissenschaft* scholars such as Zunz and Frankel would apply critical historical perspective to the sacred texts of Jewish tradition, historicizing them in contrast to their own claim of timelessness, and thereby sowed the seeds of modern Judaism. Perhaps the best example of the use of history to modernize Judaism was the work of Abraham Geiger, the founding father of Reform Judaism. Secondly, the emancipation of European Jewry from medieval restrictions, the move ‘out of the ghetto’ and the solution of ‘the Jewish question’ (i.e., historical antisemitism) also made good use of the new Jewish historical consciousness. The classic 19th century Jewish history of Heinrich Graetz is the prime example of using history as justification for Jewish social and political inclusion, and conversely, as an effective response to antisemitism. By highlighting periods of successful integration such as ‘the golden age’ of Spain, and by emphasizing Jewish intellectuality and achievement, historians such as Graetz offered powerful arguments in favor of Emancipation and contra antisemitism. Though Salo Baron would later revise this historical privileging of the modern period (the ghetto wasn’t all bad, he reminded us), he too used Jewish history to support the modern project of social integration, of being Jews and members of society at once. Third and finally, the 19th century rise of Jewish nationalism—primarily Zionism but also including the related movement of Diaspora Autonomism—also made substantive use of Jewish history. In support of Jewish national existence, historian Simon Dubnow argued that Jewish history was made up of a series of cultural centers. Zionist historiography of the early 20th century would assert that the Jewish nation had finally returned to its homeland. And American Jewish educators of the same period stressed Jewish history as the basis for engendering a sense of Jewish peoplehood. In the modern period, Jewish history became a new source of authority for Jews, replacing for many the traditional authorities of God and Torah, and elevating “Israel,” the Jewish people, to a position of centrality and primacy.

II. All of the above, I argue, is directly applicable to the challenges of today’s American Jewish community. First is the crisis of liberal Judaism. We find ourselves in a period of Orthodox ascendancy, in which a growing sector of the non-Orthodox majority is abandoning religion entirely, while others exhibit a weakening attachment to their religious institutions and traditions. A kind of ‘casual fundamentalism’ and content-less spirituality often take the place of a serious engagement with modern Jewish theology and ongoing religious innovation, i.e., a *living* tradition. The times are good for traditionalists but less so for modernists in contemporary Judaism. But just as early 19th century Jews resorted to historical study and adopted historical perspective in order to renew Judaism for their times, so too may Jewish history education play a primary role in the current revival of Judaism. In the next instance, the modern relationship between Jews and the world has been complicated in recent decades by first, the Holocaust and unresolved post-Holocaust trauma; and second, by the resurgence of antisemitism around the world and the related quagmire of Israel politics. The Jewish Question has reemerged. I believe that Jewish history education can play an important part in helping to heal our collective memory
of the Holocaust, helping to explain and counter contemporary antisemitism, and ultimately, to readjust the Jewish condition in relation to a changing world. Third and last, the phenomenon of intermarriage poses a challenge that has yet to be fully understood or adequately addressed. The high rate of interfaith marriage (58% is the most recent estimate) means that more non-Jews than ever before are in familial relationships with Jews, and far more non-Jews than ever thought possible in the past are now actively or peripherally engaged in Jewish communal life. The very notion of ‘Jewish peoplehood’ has become contested and confused. Once again, just as Jewish historical consciousness in the past helped to build a sense of peoplehood, so too can Jewish history today help us sort through and rationalize the meaning of Jewish group existence. Indeed, what would it mean to the non-Jews entering Jewish life to encounter and absorb Jewish history? Might not a better Jewish historical understanding help assimilate them into the Jewish collective, and at the same time, serve to redefine the conventional understanding of the Jewish people? All three of these are critical challenges facing the Jewish community of today—my assertion is that a deeper engagement with the Jewish past would be extremely helpful in meeting such challenging conditions.

III. In order to test this assertion, I propose a year-long study of a contemporary liberal Jewish congregation (perhaps two). Congregations such as Romemu in New York and Ikar in Los Angeles would provide an ideal setting for such a study, as they both purport to represent the future of American Judaism. Demographically, they contain both the moderately affiliated majority as well as growing numbers of intermarried families. Through survey questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and ethnographic observation, I will test my theses that: 1) The religious culture of Liberal Judaism is in trouble and might be effectively enhanced through Jewish history education; 2) Holocaust memory, the response to antisemitism, and Israel political discourse are together areas of tension in the Jewish community in need of resolution—and Jewish history education may help us as a community to deal with such vexing issues in healthier and more rational ways; and 3) For American Jews, intermarriage is the challenge of the 21st century. To paraphrase the Passover Haggadah, what does Jewish history mean to them (the intermarried and their families)? In sum, how might the intervention of Jewish history education help to heal the rifts in our community and in our consciousness?