What Is The Meaning of These Stones to You?
Material Culture, the American Jewish Home, and the Jewish Past

In the Book of Joshua, twelve Israelites, one from each tribe, pick up and carry with them a stone from the Jordan River. These stones are meant to serve as a commemoration of the wondrous and significant event that happened there when the waters “stopped,” allowing priests to transport the Ark of the Covenant across the river. In the text, Joshua explains that these stones were to serve as symbols for children, prompting them to ask, and the community to remember, this important Jewish journey. What stones, if any, do American Jews carry? How do they use objects in the home, including Jewish books, music, family photographs, and Judaica to connect to the Jewish past? to remember personal or public Jewish journeys? This project aims to explore memory, history and material culture in the American Jewish home.

Scholars of historical thinking have established the utility of looking beyond the classroom to appreciate what Americans know about and how they connect to history (Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998; Wineberg 2002; Baron 2012). The home is a fruitful place for investigation, as “the home contains the most special objects: those that were selected by the person to attend to regularly or to have close at hand, that create permanence in the intimate life of that person and therefore that are most involved in making up his or her identity.” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p.17). By focusing on material culture in the American Jewish home, this study builds on the work of historians who have demonstrated that religious artifacts can add dimension to our understanding of the past (McDannell, 1995; Joselit, 1994; Morgan and Promey, 2001). Moreover, material culture can also provide a useful bridge between history and memory, illuminating the symbiotic relationship between the past and the present. Family photographs, inherited Judaica and souvenirs from Jewish journeys prompt conversation about what the past means now, in this moment (Lowenthal, 1998; Kean and Martin, 2013).
In order to investigate the presence of the past in American Jewish homes, I conducted interviews with 30 Jewish adults in San Diego, CA. The majority of the interviews occurred in peoples’ homes, where we could see and discuss relevant Jewish family photographs, art, books, music, and artifacts. These interviews included general, open ended questions about the respondent’s own Jewish story, his/her relationship to Jewish history, and the presence of Jewish material culture in the home. In this way, participants defined the Jewish past in their own terms; they shaped and shared their own sense of what was memorable and meaningful. Participants navigated the river of Jewish history, and in the process, selected and shared their own touchstones for Jewish history and Jewish memory.

The resulting data suggests several areas to explore and interpret in order to better comprehend the relationship between the Jewish past and the present in American Jewish homes, and what role, if any, material culture plays in helping American Jews to understand, value, and experience the past. Specifically, the interviews revealed three pathways between past and present that involve material culture: 1. personal, everyday points of connection to the past  2. books, and 3. souvenirs and heritage sites. For the purpose of this memorandum, I will outline the first of these themes. The final paper will include a full treatment of each theme, with visual and textual support from the interviews.

The past is personal. In their (1994) survey of popular uses of history in American life, Rosenzweig and Thelen learned the importance of word choice. “History,” they discovered, was a conversation stopper. “History conjured up something done by famous people that others studied in school; respondents said that history was formal, analytical, official and distant (Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998, p. 6) “The past” was the preferred term. “The past” invited people to talk about family, race and nation, about where they had come from and what they had learned along the way” (p. 6). “The past” is personal and accessible. For this reason, the first question in this study asked participants to share their own Jewish past. I asked each participant to tell me his/her Jewish story. This question worked on
several, different levels. First, it recognized the power of narrative in relating identity. Nancy Ammerman, in her work on religion in everyday life, argues that people carry their beliefs in stories, and that narrative is more illustrative than controlled conversation about philosophy or knowledge when it comes to accessing an individual’s sense of religion and identity (Ammerman, 2014, pp. 7-9). By carefully listening to the stories that these Jewish adults told about their past, it was possible to learn something about how they understand Jewish history, and how that understanding of history might impact their present lives. For example, did they fit their own personal stories into conventional narratives and frameworks of Jewish history? What kinds of activities, events and ideas did they identify as Jewish? Do they continue to participate or relate to those activities, events and ideas?

In addition, asking about the subject’s personal past revealed the myriad shapes and forms that the past takes in these respondents’ lives, including genealogical research, family reunions, family heirlooms, and family photographs. The American Jews interviewed for this study interacted with the past regularly and in tangible ways. One participant pulled out a set of brass candlesticks that belonged to his parents. “These are older than I am,” he explained. “Every Friday night growing up, we used them. They may be from when my mom was little. I got them when my father died. We use them now when we make Shabbat on Friday night. My nephew used them for his son’s bar mitzvah. His son was named after my zayde. They are solid brass. I could use them to work out!” These candlesticks connect the participant to the past, to his parents and to his own Jewish experience celebrating Shabbat while he was growing up. They also connect the Jewish past and the Jewish future. He carried them across the country to use at his nephew’s bar mitzvah, to create a solid brass chain across time, geography, and generation.

Another participant showed me her mahjong set. She bought this particular Bakelite set at a swap meet in California because it was just like a set that her mother used in New York. She remembers
that her mother’s friends would come over to her childhood home in Queens to play mahjong. “I love the sound of the tiles. The sound of the tiles means safety-family-connection-Jewishness-lack of fear-something you can trust.” Later in life, she played the game with her mom and sister around the pool at her mother’s condominium in Florida. It was one of the best afternoons of her life. “We laughed so hard we were sick,” she recalls. These vivid memories of mahjong inspired her to buy the game and then to start to take classes so that she can “really learn to play.” She connected with a group of Jewish women at the JCC and they now play together regularly. Here, pleasant past associations with a Jewish cultural phenomenon- mahjong- prompted the participant to buy a set like the one she remembers, and to learn to play. Notably, her memories of mahjong are not just about the Bakelite set, but also reflect a clear appreciation for the group bond that the game inspires, and she aimed to recreate that too. She trusts that the tiles that created a sense of happiness, comfort and trust in the past can cause those qualities to click in the present as well.

In both cases, these everyday objects- candlesticks and a mahjong set- connect their owners to the Jewish past. Moreover, they evoke strong memories that make these objects meaningful to present day Jewish identity formation. This study considers these objects, as well as other family heirlooms, photographs, books, souvenirs, experiential travel and historymaking activities as conduits for transmission of Jewish memory, history and identity.
Brass candlesticks

Bakelite mahjong set
Bibliography


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