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WHAT IS THE USE OF  
AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY HISTORY?

by  
Jonathan D. Sarna

In order to invite me to deliver this lecture, your President had to track me down to Philadelphia; specifically, to an office provided me by a thoroughly modern corporation, where I sat surrounded by computer terminals and high technology machinery, engaged in researching the history of the Jewish Publication Society. You may wonder what the connection is between this modern firm and my history. The answer is that the archives of the Jewish Publication Society happen to have been stored in the basement of this impressive building, and the corporation kindly provided me with an office, where I could bring my almost century-old documents and read them in air-conditioned comfort.

Naturally, my work aroused no end of curiosity among the corporate workers. After they got over their initial fears that I was reading old work-records dealing with them, some came by to investigate. A few evinced considerable interest. Another few wondered at the fact that I actually seemed to earn a living by reading other people's past scribbles. And then there were one or two--perhaps they were bolder than the rest--who openly questioned whether my work on the history of the Jewish Publication Society had any value, particularly when compared to the

innovative work they were doing in high technology. Let me emphasize that these were not crude people who thought, as Henry Ford did, that "History is more or less bunk." They were instead well-educated scientists and businessmen, who knew history only as a rather boring subject in high school, and honestly sought to understand why someone should spend his life studying "what is done and over with."

I am not sure that I ever satisfied these people, though they always remained cordial. I am, however, sure that their question--what is the value of history--does deserve serious attention, and not just in personal terms, but also in terms of an organization like this one, that devotes significant amounts of time, energy, and money to keeping the past alive. Why bother?

You will forgive me if I give short shrift to the hedonist answer to this question, "Do history because it's so much fun," and even less to the Mt. Everest answer, "Do history for the same reason that you climb Mt. Everest--because it's there." Both of these answers seem to me rather shallow, and would only carry weight with those already converted. Outsiders would hardly be swayed by either argument.

Instead, I should like to suggest five uses of history, really five broad principles, that I think that all of us who are engaged in the practice and teaching of history, especially those of us engaged in history at the community level, and even more especially those of us who are Jewish and may, therefore, have a special relationship with history, should be keeping in mind.

First, our study of the past teaches us that *we 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, there have been those who have sought to write Jews out of history. To this day, some schoolbooks 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 historian and every Jewish historical society is to demonstrate that this is utterly false, and that we actually have a continuous history dating back some 3,500 years.

Now there is a great danger in our learning to appreciate the power of the past, and that is, since power corrupts, that we may fall prey to the temptation to rewrite the past, to conform to what we wish had happened, rather than what did. Samuel Butler once pointed out that "though God cannot alter the past, historians can, [and] it is perhaps because they can be useful to God in this respect that He tolerates their existence." A bit cynical, perhaps, but we all know that some have rewritten the past to make themselves or their ancestors more significant and saintly than they could possibly have been. Consider how many people ascribe every great discovery in history to members of their faith or ethnic group. And what about some of our own family historians who seem only to discover rabbis and scholars on family trees--so many, indeed, that one wonders if there were any ordinary Jews in the Old World? Then there are those who rewrite the past to cover up previous errors: unfortunate friendships or ideologies once advocated and now repudiated. The list goes on.

At the time, it is always easy to justify these rewritings of history on the basis of "what others might think," or in order to protect

somebody's reputation (as if it were somehow shameful to have made mistakes and learned from them). In retrospect, however, we know that once we begin rewriting the past for personal or political reasons, we lose all credibility. If we historians cannot be relied upon to preserve the past accurately, nobody can.

Besides reminding us that we have a history, the past shows us--and this is my second point--that *we have a usable history*, that is to say a history that can teach us something about the present. In looking over your list of publications, I was not surprised to find that many of them deal with the "emergence" of a Jewish community, or its history from an earlier period until today. By providing this kind of invaluable information, you are shedding light on the historical background of contemporary life. Again, I find that your Society has published items on Indiana Jewish women, like Minnette Baum and Ruth Sapinsky. Here too, history is shedding light on a current issue, which, you quite properly point out, has deep roots in the past. It is, I think, one of our great obligations as historians to bring the fruits of accumulated past wisdom to bear on contemporary questions, be they Jewish questions or secular 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. Since, as we know, those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it, the same mistakes recur again and again.

Let me offer an example from my own work on how history can shed light on contemporary issues. One of the subjects that interests me is how Jews responded to Christian missionaries in 19th Century America. There were, of course, a great many attempts to convert the Jews in the 19th century, beginning about 1816, with the establishment of the first missionary societies to

the Jews, and continuing on into the 20th century. The question Jews faced was how to protect themselves, they being a very small and vulnerable community. There was, of course, a rich polemical heritage that Jews could draw upon: Jews and Christians, after all, had been engaged in theological arguments for hundreds of years. But even though I found many of these polemics extant, it quickly became apparent to me that they did not form the major thrust of the Jewish response. Instead, Jews realized that if missionaries succeeded, it was probably because they were doing something important--fulfilling some vital need--that Jews were not fulfilling. To counter missionaries, Jews reasoned that they had to figure out what the missionaries were doing right, and then imitate them--which is what they did.

Missionaries initiated a newspaper and wrote educational tracts which they sent to Jews in outlying small towns. Jews countered by producing a newspaper, Isaac Leiser's magnificent *Occident*, and by writing thoroughly Jewish tracts for wide-spread distribution. Thanks to missionaries, Jewish leaders became aware that Jews in outlying areas had been somewhat neglected. Missionaries set up free mission schools in poor Jewish areas; Jews responded with free mission schools of their own, realizing somewhat guiltily that they hadn't paid enough attention to the educational needs of the poor in their midst. Missionaries provided free health care to the poor; Jews did the same, and so on. Unfortunately, this lesson was in the course of time forgotten, so today when there is again considerable agitation about missionaries, Jews for Jesus, and similar groups, it doesn't occur to us to do what was done in the 19th century. We fail to learn from conversionists what we, as a Jewish community, are doing wrong. The fact these groups operate on college campuses, among the elderly, and among recent immigrants doesn't suggest anything to us, although

if we were more historically minded, a bell would ring in our heads, we would recognize a familiar problem, and our responses might be more effective.

In short, history can put a contemporary problem in a broader and sometimes quite different perspective. It seems to me that local Jewish historical societies have the resources to encourage this kind of "relevant" research on a host of questions. Our potential in this regard has not yet even begun to be realized.

My third principle states that the past teaches us not just that we have a useable history, but also that *we have a variegated history*, a history that is much richer and more diverse than any of us realize. We tend to assume that what exists now has always been, and that our city and state is a microcosm of the whole country, if not the whole world. History, properly studied, counters this ethnocentrism by enlarging our awareness of the rich possibilities inherent in human experience. One day I shall be able to tell wide-eyed children how human beings survived without electronic calculators. My father remembers how people got along without Xerox machines. My late Grandfather remembered Jewish life in Konin without electricity. But even in a single time frame, history teaches us to appreciate the varied nature of human experience. We are only now beginning to understand, for example, how different the East European Jewish immigrant experience was depending upon where one lived. The World of Our Fathers in New York was entirely different from the World of Our Fathers (and Mothers) in Boston or Indianapolis. One of the great tasks facing local and regional Jewish community historical societies is to broaden our perspective on American Jewish history; to make it, frankly, less New York centered; to highlight and explain what made the history of Jews in, say, Indiana both different and unique. Naturally,

this entails comparative history. The history of one American Jewish community can only be understood in terms of all the other American Jewish communities, and by the way, in terms of the non-Jewish communities. Though American Jewish communities have differed significantly, none has ever been an island entire of itself. It is our task as historians to fight tunnel vision, and to look even at narrow phenomena from the broadest possible perspective.

This brings me straight into my fourth principle, which is that the past teaches us that *we have an organic history*: that differences and distances notwithstanding we are nevertheless integrally related one to another; we form one world. Secular historians have recently shown us fascinating patterns of relationships between East and West, even during those periods when we formerly believed that "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet." We now know that the twain did meet, very early, which by the way helps explain parallels between phenomena like mysticism in the East and West. We also now know that Jews and Christians interacted much more than we once believed, even in pre-modern settings. Such things as regional cuisine, music, dance, superstitions, and folk medicine all bespeak considerable cross-cultural interfaith sharing. There was much less cultural isolation than we once thought.

In terms of American Jewish life, history can point to similar patterns of inter-relationship. Up to 1865, for example, some 10% of Cincinnati Jewish merchants previously lived in Indiana. Ties between these two neighbors have remained strong, partly because of mobility and trade, and in no small measure because of Hebrew Union College which has supplied so many Indiana congregations with commuting rabbis. At the same time, Indiana Jews kept in touch with developments in America and around the world. A comparatively large

number of Indiana families belonged to the Jewish Publication Society, a disproportionately large number compared to other states, and many took out subscriptions to East and West Coast, as well as to European Jewish periodicals. Looking at the other side of the coin, a fair number of Easterners and Westerners have for many years subscribed to an Indianapolis periodical, the *Jewish Post and Opinion*, because it carries news unavailable elsewhere. In short, history generally and Indiana Jewish history in particular can teach us important lessons about the ties that bind: those that bind us as human beings to one another, those that bind us as Jews to one another.

My final principle, the fifth, carries this previous theme further, and also connects back to number one. The past teaches us that *we have a history that bind us across time*. We are, in other words, not only bound to one another, but also part of an ongoing process of history: links in an endless chain stretching from past to future. History fights present-mindedness and fights the historical notion that "nothing ever changes." We know that *everything* changes, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, sometimes cyclically. Today's news is tomorrow's history.

This principle, by the way, has critical implications for historical societies. A local historical society should not just collect materials from the past, it must also be gathering contemporary materials, and it does well to make arrangements to collect *future* materials--all future synagogue bulletins, for example. One of our obligations as historians is to teach people about continuity and discontinuity, about growth and decline, in short, about that single force that may well be more powerful than all the others: the force of change. We have to preserve, display, and ultimately to explain both

that which binds us to the past, and that which now distinguishes us from the past. We are not just past-oriented, we are present and future-oriented as well.

Now I am frequently asked by historical society archivists whether they can take the risk of throwing anything out--isn't that destroying the past that we should be preserving? And yet, on the other hand, as those of us who are inveterate collectors know, if we never throw anything out, we very quickly become overrun and find it impossible to organize what we have, in which case it has no value to anyone. So the obvious answer is that we must throw things out. But what?

There are some documents, like newspapers, that we preserve only on microfilm (or fiche), discarding the original. There are others that we preserve only in one copy, even if presented with ten. Then there are items that we find more appropriate for other repositories, and we give them away or trade them. If Mr. Cohen has in his papers documents relating to the Lilly Foundation, which he once served as consultant, many of those papers may be more appropriate for a business archive. Other papers are easily available elsewhere and can be destroyed in clear conscience; clippings from *The New York Times*, for example (unless they happen to have some very special relevance). Finally, we sometimes must purge our collections of items that do not seem to add anything to the historical record, like old laundry and shopping lists. These are always tough decisions, and I prefer in every case to err on the side of caution by routinely preserving a few randomly chosen samples of what I am discarding. Yet as long as we remember our five principles--we have a history, we have a useable history, we have a variegated history, we have an organic history, and we have an ongoing history--then at least we have some standard by which to make

these selection judgments. Items that fail to further any of our five principles, and do not extend our knowledge or scope in anyway either, may justifiably be excluded from a collection, even if doing so hurts us inside.

In closing, I have to confess that when Mr. Schwartz first asked me to speak to you about "the value of American Jewish community history," it seemed to me a bit like bringing coals to Newcastle, or preaching to the converted. You already are thoroughly committed to preserving history; that is why you belong to the Indiana Jewish Historical Society in the first place. I should have been asked to deliver this talk to the people back in that firm where I had my office this summer in Philadelphia. And yet, after thinking about it more deeply, I concluded that your president, as he usually is, was correct. We need periodically to remind ourselves that what we are doing is important, and that it makes a difference if we do what we do well. We need to remember that we play a vital role, imparting not only essential information, but some essential principles that have yet to be widely learned or assimilated. We have much to do, much to teach. It is a joy to find so many of you taking part in this great effort.

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