

# PROCEEDINGS



**Celebrate 350  
Jewish Life in America  
1654 ~ 2004**

**INAUGURAL NATIONAL PLANNING CONFERENCE  
Tuesday, September 9, 2003**

## **Keynote Address: "The Goals and Meaning of the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration of American Jewish History"**

**Professor Jonathan Sarna  
Chairman  
Academic Advisory Council**

It is a great pleasure to be here, particularly in the Center for Jewish History and in the presence of so many friends and colleagues. This is truly a once in 350-year privilege! Just a year ago it did not seem so clear to me that the American Jewish community would commemorate its 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary. But it is now clear that the celebration will, with your help, take place a year from now. The many events scheduled (along with those still to be planned) will, I expect, mark a significant milestone in the life of our community.

Many of you already know a great deal about the immediate events that we are commemorating in 2004: the arrival in New Amsterdam of a small boatload of Jewish refugees from Recife, Brazil – "23 souls big and little," so an old record relates, though some of the details remain disputed. It is worth remembering that in all likelihood there were more women and children in the group than men. These refugees overcame a series of legal and political obstacles, including opposition from the colony's governor, Peter Stuyvesant. With help from the Jewish community back in Amsterdam, they won the right to set down roots in New Amsterdam – specifically the right to "travel" "trade" "live" and "remain" provided that "the poor among them

shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation."

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The story of early American Jewry reflects some very important themes that should continue to concern us. From the very beginning, for example, the fate of Jews in America was tied in with that of other religious dissenters. "Giving them [Jews] liberty," Peter Stuyvesant wrote, "we cannot refuse the Lutherans and the Papists." The decision about admitting Jews to New Amsterdam was, at the deepest level, a decision about the social and religious character of New Amsterdam. Because the Jews, and the Lutherans, and the Papists [meaning the Catholics] did eventually receive liberty,



this city became what it is today: a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual community – and so eventually did the nation as a whole. Small as they were in number, Jews played a significant part in that early story and have remained part of the story of pluralism and tolerance in this country ever since.

No less important a theme from 1654 is the fact that the Dutch authorities, forced to choose between their economic interests and their religious sensibilities, voted with their pocketbooks in allowing Jews to remain – a significant sign of modernity. The “usefulness” of Jews, the fact that they might help to enrich the colonies, proved far more important to the Dutch than the fact that they were not Christians. The Dutch West India Company was worried that a heavy-handed and restrictive colonial policy would diminish the population, discourage immigration, and scare off investors. Its advice to Peter Stuyvesant in 1663 might profitably be studied by some of our civic and religious leaders even today: “Shut your eyes, at least [do] not force people's consciences, but allow every one to have his own belief, as long as he behaves quietly and legally, gives no offense to his neighbor and does not oppose the government.”

In short, 1654, viewed in its proper perspective, is truly an important historical milestone. It serves as a jumping off point for recalling and exploring a whole range of significant themes, many of them, I believe, still highly relevant in our time.

Of course, the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of American Jewish life should not exclusively focus on 1654. We have, after all, come a long way from those initial Jews from Recife. My hope is that we will celebrate, commemorate and investigate *all* aspects of American Jewish life in 2004 - 2005: heroes and villains, time-tested themes and neglected ones. The 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary should mark a serious educational and intellectual milestone in American Jewish life: a time to learn from our past, reflect upon our present, and shape our vision for the future.

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We have already heard some of the exciting plans for the nationwide commemoration of the 350<sup>th</sup>. It is, I think, an important statement about the American Jewish community that the 350<sup>th</sup> is not a top-down operation, where planning is generated by a small elite. The 350<sup>th</sup> is instead a collaborative venture. The more collaborators the better.

In thinking about activities for the 350<sup>th</sup>, however, I want to encourage all of us to think not just in terms of a 12 or 24 month period of excitement, but also about long-term projects that will serve as a permanent legacy of the 350<sup>th</sup> celebration, a gift to ourselves and our posterity. The Academic Advisory Council will be discussing this subject this afternoon. But for now, let me suggest two kinds of projects that would, I think, prove particularly valuable.



The first kind of project would be a survey project: an effort to uncover buried treasures concerning our community and its past. All of us who labor in the field know that the archival sources of American Jewry are widely scattered and often impossible to locate. Only a small fraction is found here at the Center for Jewish History and at The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. Far more are found in diverse archival collections – federal, state and local archives, presidential libraries, university archives, institutional archives, synagogue archives, local Jewish and non-Jewish historical societies, selected libraries and archives abroad (especially in Israel, but also in Holland, Germany, England and Eastern Europe), and most important of all many invaluable materials remain preserved in private hands: in attics, basements, and on family bookshelves. There is no single guide to these materials, no map of our community's hidden treasures, no website where one can go to locate them. What we need, therefore, is a large-scale effort – I suspect it would have to be a heavily volunteer effort – to find and describe these materials. Our goal should be to create a mother lode of information concerning where our historical treasures are buried, an on-line *Union Catalog of American Jewish Archival Collections*. Properly done, this would be the kind of long-term legacy project that would make the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary enduringly significant.

A second kind of large-scale project that I should like to propose is the creation of a vast "virtual library" of American Jewish history, an on-line resource where primary sources dealing with all aspects of the American Jewish experience would be made available, through the internet, to everyone in the world at no cost. Today, if you want to read most of the great documents of American Jewish history you need to travel to an archive or a library. The vast bulk of the 5,892 individual publications and 620 serials produced by or about American Jews between 1654 and 1900 are found in fewer than five places. [If you do not believe me, see Robert Singerman's great bibliography of this literature, which, by the way, is itself hard to find.] The full-run of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency's daily news bulletin, the Jewish equivalent of the *New York Times*, the most important source of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish news for the past 75 years, is, so far as I know, available no place; it has to be pieced together and is tragically underutilized. Even the full-run of the *American Jewish Year Book* is difficult to locate and time-consuming to search through. Imagine what a revolution it would be to place all of this material on the internet where anyone could read it and search it. Imagine what a boon this would be to students here and



abroad. Imagine how easy this would make it for anyone to conduct research (you do not have to be a professional historian to be vitally interested in the past!). The National Yiddish Book Center, as many of you know, is working to make all Yiddish literature available on the internet – a great project: shouldn't we be doing the same kind of thing for American Judaica?

There are, I hasten to admit, some already existing on-line projects that demonstrated the feasibility of what I am talking about, and have made available important American Jewish historical documents in English and now in Hebrew – several of these websites, by the way, have been put together by dedicated lay volunteers. But what we need is a much more systematic project, carried out according to the best practices in the field. To my mind, this kind of project – making the sources of our past available on-line – is the greatest possible legacy that we could leave to future generations. I can think of no more important “legacy” project for us to consider as part of our 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration.

Now some of you may secretly wonder why we should commemorate our past at all? Would it not simply be better to look ahead and plan for the future? Why should we care about 1654 and its aftermath? Why should we ask others to care? Why, in short, should we still consider our history relevant and important?

This is not the occasion for a full-scale exploration of this theme, but one point is critically important. Both Jews and non-Jews today tend to view our history in tragic or lachrymose terms. When people think of the history of Jews, they think of persecution, expulsion, tragedy, mass-murder, and now terror.

American Jewish history stands as the great exception to this melancholy story. Without downplaying the history of anti-Semitism here, and we shouldn't downplay it, the fact remains that persecution, expulsion, tragedy, and mass murder are *not* the central themes of American Jewish life and never have been. Instead, American Jewish history offers us the opportunity to explore how Jews have flourished in a free and pluralistic society where church and state are separated and where religion is entirely voluntary. If there is a central theme to American Jewish history, it is the story of how Judaism and Jewish life have been transformed by freedom. Freedom, of course, is not an unmixed blessing. It carries with it significant challenges, even perils. Some minority groups in America

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have literally been loved to death in this country, intermarrying out of existence, disappearing into the mainstream. That danger threatens Jews too. But even with this concern, American

Jewish history necessarily challenges the standard Jewish narrative of persecutions and expulsions, and it encourages us to explore instead an entirely different set of questions, which emerge, unsurprisingly, from the central themes of *American* life: freedom, diversity, and church-state separation.

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There are many other reasons as well for studying American Jewish history, none more important than our obligation to posterity. Our job, the writer Nessa Rapoport has properly reminded us, is “to translate and explain what has come before us to those who will carry it on after us.” That in a nutshell is what this commemoration is all about.

Another writer, the great Norwegian novelist, Ole Edvaart Rolvaag, once wrote that, “when a people becomes interested in its past life [and] seeks to acquire knowledge in order to better understand itself, it always experiences an awakening of new life.” The 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of American Jewish life provides us with a welcome opportunity to profit from this keen insight. To study the history of American Judaism is, among many other things, to be reminded anew of the theme of human potential, in our case, the ability of American Jews – young and old, men and women alike – to change the course of history and transform a piece of the world. American Jewish history is, after all, not just a record of events; it is the story of how people *shaped* events – establishing and maintaining communities, responding to challenges, working for change. That is perhaps the greatest lesson of all that American Jewish History can offer us: the lesson that we too can make a difference, that the future is ours to create.

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