

WHAT'S THE USE OF LOCAL JEWISH HISTORY?

BY JONATHAN D. SARNA

Richard Lederer, in a delightful volume entitled *Anguished English*, offers readers a glimpse at history as students understand it, based upon written work turned in to their teachers. Among the “remarkable occurrences” that he preserves for us are the following:

Socrates was a famous Greek Teacher who went around giving people advice. They killed him. Socrates died from an overdose of wedlock.

Abraham Lincoln became America’s greatest Precedent. Lincoln’s mother died in infancy, and he was born in a log cabin which he built with his own hands. When Lincoln was president, he wore only a tall silk hat.

And finally, my favorite:

The nineteenth century was a time of a great many thoughts and inventions. People stopped reproducing by hand and started reproducing by machine. The invention of the steamboat caused a network of rivers to spring up. Samuel Morse invented a code of telepathy. Louis Pasteur invented a cure for rabbis.¹

For all of the humor in these embarrassing errors, we should also read them with a great deal of sadness. For these errors, and a host of less humorous ones, point to a problem of quite considerable dimensions in our day: widespread public ignorance of the facts of history. Such ignorance characterizes the general American population and is, unfortunately, no less true in Jewish circles. Even otherwise well-educated Jews know little about the span of Jewish history, the great names in Jewish history, and the great themes of Jewish history. American Jewish history, our field, has been particularly neglected. Many American Jews have very little sense of how the American Jewish community developed, how different immigrant waves impacted upon it, and how our community is like and unlike other great diaspora centers in the history of our people.

The truth is that we have not been very successful in the past in explaining why American Jewish history is important for students to learn, why local Jewish history is important, and why our history should be preserved. For this reason, I want to suggest here five uses of history, really five broad principles, that all of us 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,

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therefore, have a special relationship with history, should keep in mind as we go about our work.

To begin with, we study local Jewish history because it 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, Yiddish), 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. The colonial Jews of Newport illustrate this principle. They were deeply shaped by their Sephardic heritage and by their own or their family's experience, in Catholic countries, of living as secret Jews. The enormous significance among them of family ties and their close personal and business associations with Jews up and down the Sephardic trade network, spanning three continents, reflected this heritage — as Stanley Chyet's biography of the colonial Newport Jewish merchant Aaron Lopez amply demonstrates. Lopez and other Jews in colonial Newport not only had a history; they also knew that it was one that greatly impacted upon them.²

Precisely because the past has this shaping power, there have always 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. Others, including some so-called multicultural texts, bury Jews among dead white males, as if there is nothing distinctive about Jewish history at all.³ 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 3500 years, and dating back in America — and in Rhode Island — to the mid-17th century.

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 actually did. Samuel Butler once cynically observed that “though God cannot alter the past, historians can,” and he speculated that because of this God “tolerates their existence.”⁴ I hope he was wrong, 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.

Synagogue histories are particularly prone to this malady, and I was therefore particularly pleased to read Seebert Goldowsky's recent history of the Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David (Temple Beth-El) in Providence, where this pitfall is carefully avoided. Dr. Goldowsky relates, at one point, that Rev. Jacob Voorsanger lost his job with the congregation in 1878 because of a controversy over whether a student who had done no work in religious school should be graduated.

Voorsanger scrupulously refused to graduate the student, but as she happened to be the daughter of the richest man in the congregation her father's response — "either the Rabbi goes, or I go" — ultimately carried the day. The synagogue's minutes, like most such documents, attempted to prettify the story by relating that Rev. Voorsanger "accepted a call" from a congregation in the South. Happily Dr. Goldowsky, building upon an oral history preserved by Rabbi William G. Braude, restores the truth, teaching us, in the process, much that we would not otherwise know about the balance of power in the congregation at that time.⁵

The more common practice, however, is illustrated in the classic (and one hopes apocryphal) story about one Mrs. Depew, scion of an old pioneer family. Mrs. Depew, it seems, decided to commission a history of her illustrious ancestors. She approached the local historical society, of which she was a member, and it agreed to do the job. The only stipulation was that "due sensitivity" be shown concerning Mrs. Depew's late Uncle Charlie, the black sheep of the family, whose life ended, alas, on the electric chair at Sing Sing prison. The historical society promised to be very sensitive, and in time it produced a beautifully illustrated volume — *The Depews: A Family History* — that it proudly delivered to the family mansion. Naturally, Mrs. Depew opened at once to the chapter on Uncle Charlie, and there she read as follows: "In his last years, Charles Depew occupied the chair of applied electricity in one of the government's great institutions. He died in harness and his death came as an extreme shock."

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. This temptation is particularly great when one is writing about one's own kinsmen. Nevertheless, the temptation must at all costs be resisted. For 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 our second point, that we have a usable history, that is to say a history that can teach us something about the present. Since the present has deep roots in the past and can only be understood in terms of that past, to the extent that the past is forgotten we lose the ability to comprehend contemporary events. Without history, the present lacks both context and perspective.

Take, for example, the case of Ezra Stiles and the Jews. Rev. Stiles, one of the most learned New Englanders of his day, became pastor of the Second Church of Newport in 1755 and evinced a great deal of interest in local Jews, several of whom he befriended. His philosemitism is reflected in his diary, his visits to the Newport synagogue, his study of Hebrew and Hebrew sources, and in his close relationship with Rabbi Raphael Haim Isaac Carigal, an emissary from the Holy Land, who spent

five months in Newport, from March through July 1G73, as the local Jewish community's guest. Yet for all that he knew and genuinely liked Jews, Stiles continued to view them as unassimilable and worthy of divine punishment, and he always sought to convert them to Christianity. In the tense period preceding the American Revolution he went so far as to question their loyalty, reporting to his diary, on one occasion, that they were involved in a clandestine international intelligence-gathering conspiracy centered in London. "Perhaps Stiles's attitude toward the Jews," Arthur Chiel concluded, after surveying all of the relevant material, "might be best characterized as one of ambivalence."⁶

It is precisely this ambivalence that makes the relationship between Stiles and the Jews of enduring significance. History, in this case, sheds helpful light on a wide range of Jewish-Christian relationships in America, extending down to our own day.

The ability to place a contemporary problem into a broader and sometimes quite different perspective is one of the most important functions of history. Local Jewish history, in the same way, can shed light on local problems and how they developed. We should be encouraging much more research of this kind, for we have not yet even begun to recognize its potential. Jewish history and especially local Jewish history is also significant because — this is our third principle — it teaches us that we have a variegated history, a history that is rich and diverse. Too often, young people assume that what exists today has always existed and that our city and state is a microcosm of the whole country, if not the whole world. History, properly studied, counters this ethnocentrism. It introduces us, for example, to the aristocratic lives of Newport Jews more than two hundred years ago and to the impoverished lives of immigrant Jews in Providence some one hundred years later. It teaches us that the history of men may be different from the history of women, and that "the world of our fathers" in New York was different from the world of our fathers (and mothers) in Providence.

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. We need to highlight and explain what made American Jewish history here in Rhode Island and in myriad locations throughout the United States both different and unique.

This leads us straight into our fourth principle, which is that local Jewish history shows us that we have an organic history: that differences and distances notwithstanding we are nevertheless integrally related to one another; we form one world. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries fascinating and largely unexplored ties linked Dutch Jews to the Newport and Providence communities. Isaac Touro, Moses Michael Hays, Jacob Rodriguez Pareira, Myer Noot, Jacob Voorsanger —

all were Dutch Jews. Some of these men continued, even in America, to maintain connections to the great Sephardic center of Jewish life back in Amsterdam. Within the United States, one can discern similar kinds of intercommunal relationships. Providence Jews, for example, were at one time closely tied to the Jews of New York.

Congregation Sons of Israel, originally a Sephardic congregation, felt a special kinship to New York's Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, Shearith Israel. Later, as the Boston Jewish community strengthened, Providence Jews fell more naturally into its orbit. One indication of this is the fact that Reform Judaism came to Providence and to Boston at about the same time, a whole generation after it arrived in other sections of the country.

In addition, by the late 19th century Providence Jewry was also involved in world Jewish affairs. The persecution of Jews in Rumania, the Dreyfus Affair, and the pogroms against Jews in Russia all met with local responses, spurred on by the traditional injunction that "all Israel is responsible for one another."⁷

Much more could be said about these subjects, but the larger point is clear. History generally, and Rhode Island 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, and those that bind Rhode Island Jews to other Jewish communities in the United States and beyond.

The fifth and final reason why local Jewish history merits our attention carries this previous theme further and brings us back to where we began: local Jewish history reminds us that we have a history that binds us across time. We are, in other words, not only bound to one another, we are also part of an ongoing process of history: links in an endless chain stretching from past to present to future. History — all history — fights the dangerous presentmindedness that contemporaries are particularly prone to: the idea that all issues are new and there is nothing to be learned from what happened in the past. In the Jewish community this misguided attitude is manifested today in the absurd idea that Jewish continuity and intermarriage are new challenges that arose in 1991 with the publication of the National Jewish Population Study. In fact, of course, these themes are as old as the history of Jewish life on this continent. Excessive focus on the present at the expense of the past blinds us to the historical forces that have promoted and continue to promote change over time. When George Santayana famously observed that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,"⁸ he had, I think, precisely this danger in mind. An historical association like this one can fight presentmindedness among Jews, and help all to appreciate how much past and present are interconnected, forming part of an historical continuum stretching across time.

Notwithstanding these five principles, some may nevertheless wonder as to how

we keep historical memory alive — especially in the absence of direct personal experience? This, in fact, is the central challenge that all of us involved in historical societies, archives and museums are attempting to confront. Remember that in only fifty years' time there will be nobody alive who will be able to speak at first hand — from memory — about three pivotal events in contemporary Jewish life: the great immigration of East European Jews to America, the death and destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust, and the creation of the State of Israel. Even today, the vast majority of world Jewry have no conscious memories of these events; we only know other people who experienced them. In fifty years those other people won't still be with us.

We already have some inkling of the dangers that lie in store when survivors are no longer alive to bear witness. I don't just mean the funny errors that stem from student confusion. I am far more concerned about the unspeakable obscenities of those who deny that the Holocaust ever happened, or those who distort the State of Israel's early history in an effort to destroy it, or even those who now rewrite the history of Black-Jewish relations in this country forgetting all the good that the alliance once accomplished. As memories fade, these already strident voices will undoubtedly grow louder and more shrill. Demagogues always thrive on historical ignorance. What can we do? Our obligation is to do all we can to preserve the past while it still is directly accessible to us. Where written records survive, let them be placed in the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association's archives. Where artifacts survive, let them be displayed in one of our Jewish museums. Where individuals survive who participated in history-making events, let them record their memories for posterity, so that their voices may be heard long after they themselves have passed from the scene. Remember that history, to a very great extent, belongs to those who preserve their records. Letters, tapes and artifacts may not fully compensate for the absence of living survivors, but future generations will cherish them, both as sacred links to the past, and as the best possible answer to those who would rewrite our past without reference to facts at all.

Now I do not mean to imply that we preserve our past solely for defensive reasons, to prevent mean-spirited distortions. Clearly, history has a positive function as well. The great Norwegian-American novelist, Ole Edvart Rolvaag, who did much to ensure that the Norwegian heritage in America has been preserved, put forth a thesis that I think applies to Jews as well. "When a people becomes interested in its past life [and] seeks to acquire knowledge in order to better understand itself," he wrote, "it always experiences an awakening of new life."⁹ Since in order to move forward we need to learn from our past, the study of history, Rolvaag reminds us, is actually a creative act, itself a means of inspiring individuals and communities to forge ahead.

I would like to think that the remarkable growth and development, in our own day,

of local and regional Jewish historical societies in America — the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association being among the most active and successful of these — also adumbrates within the American Jewish community an awakening of new life. It would seem to me that the act of recovering the forgotten histories of Jews in the many regions and municipalities of the United States, the effort to understand why Jews settled where they did, how they transformed themselves over time, how they struggled to overcome problems and challenges posed by American society, and how they emerged to become part of one of the greatest Jewish communities in all of Jewish history — this engagement with the past, it would seem to me, might very well stimulate new ideas, new approaches and new directions for American Jewish life in the decades ahead. Historical experience suggests that Jews who are actively concerned with preserving our past tend to be the same Jews who are actively concerned with securing our future. I suspect that this will prove no less true in our generation than before. Certainly it seems to be true here in Providence.

Nor is this surprising, for, as we have seen, past and future form part of a single continuum stretching across time. When we neglect or distort our past we endanger that future. When, by contrast, we preserve and engage our past — collecting it, recalling it, researching it, teasing out its lessons — then we possess the tools to shape our future confidently and creatively.



NOTES

¹ Richard Lederer, *Anguished English* (New York: Bantam, 1987), pp.12, 18, 20-21.

² Stanley F. Chyet, *Lopez of Newport: Colonial American Merchant Prince* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970).

³ See, for example, the American Jewish Committee's report of a preliminary study on *The Treatment of Jews in History and Social Studies Textbooks in Use in American High Schools* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1970), and its more recent study of *The Treatment of Jewish History in World Civilization Textbooks: A Report to the Dallas Independent School District* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1981).

⁴ Samuel Butler, *Erewhon Revisited* (New York: Dutton, 1925), p.132.

⁵ Seebert J. Goldowsky, *A Century and a Quarter of Spiritual Leadership: The Story of the Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David (Temple Beth-El) Providence, Rhode Island* (Providence, R.I.: The Congregation, 1989), pp.51-52.

⁶ Arthur A. Chiel, "Ezra Stiles and the Jews: A Study in Ambivalence," in *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus*, ed. Bertram W. Korn (New York: Ktav, 1976), p.64.

⁷ Goldowsky, pp.36-52, 152, 185. On the development of Reform Judaism in Boston, see Jonathan D. Sarna and Ellen Smith (eds.) *The Jews of Boston* (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies, 1995), esp. pp. 5-6. For the rabbinic statement, see Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shavuot, p.39a.

⁸ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (New York: Scribner, 1905), vol. I, p.284.

⁹ Quoted in Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America* (New York: Haskell House, 1969 [1940]), vol. II, p.596.