Manuscripts, Eraser Marks, and the Jewish Story: Claiming Cultural Jewishness in America

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The NYU Applied Research Collective for American Jewry convenes scholars and practitioners, in and beyond the Jewish community, to collaboratively develop recommendations in funding and policy for Jewish foundations and organizations.

Recognizing the dramatic societal, economic, and political changes of the 21st century, ARC seeks to generate a responsive body of literature and cohort of thinkers to enhance Jewish communal life for the coming decades.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite vast differences and outlooks, American Jews share a common—though diverse—history. Studies show that American Jews take pride in their identity and often express interest in what are termed the “cultural” aspects of that identity. What, though, can be done to make this culture and history more accessible, active, and meaningful? How can American Jewish educational and cultural organizations strengthen their presentation of content, drawing on the latest scholarship and storytelling methods in order to nourish a healthy, educated American Jewish community for the 21st century? In Jews and Words, Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzbeger explain, “Ours is not a bloodline, but a textline.” This paper takes inspiration from this idea, broadening it to add “storylines” and thereby include exhibitions, programs, and curricula that further interpret texts and broaden their reach.
She established friendships with the most prominent Americans of her time, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Rose Hawthorne, and Henry James. Though her family led Shearith Israel from the 1700s to her own time, Emma’s Jewish identity revolved less around liturgy and synagogue services, and more around history, language, and letters. She translated the work of medieval and modern Jewish poets from Spain and Germany; drew on Jewish history as a source of inspiration for poems, essays, and plays; and studied Hebrew.

In the 1880s, Eastern European Jews arrived in large numbers, overwhelming the available resources. Despite the language barrier, Lazarus connected to the refugees, volunteering at Ward’s Island and teaching English on the Lower East Side. She crafted essays raising awareness of Russian anti-Semitism, imploring established American Jews to help and pursuing the idea of a Jewish homeland. She wrote incessantly, ultimately producing the “New Colossus” in 1883. She was a modern Jew precisely because she forged new ways of being Jewish, even as she absorbed Jewish history.

Two stories, across a century...

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” The poet Emma Lazarus is today best known for the “New Colossus,” the sonnet that turned the Statue of Liberty into a “Mother of Exiles” and America into a beacon of welcome. Lazarus’s biographer, Esther Schor, calls her “the first modern Jew” in the United States. At first glance, however, much of what we know of her is not necessarily Jewish. Born in New York in 1849, a fifth-generation New Yorker and Sephardic Jew, she grew up in a capacious and elegant brownstone off the fashionable Union Square. She benefitted from the finest in secular education, learning French and German and devouring Heine, Dumas, and Schiller. At the age of 17 she published a book filled with hundreds of pages of verse and translations.

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Over a century later, Adam Gopnik, a grandchild of the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” explored modern Jewish identity in his 2002 New Yorker essay, “A Purim Story.” The Jewish Museum had invited Gopnik to assume the role of “purimspieler” at its annual gala, which in turn prompted Gopnik to research the story of Purim, and more broadly, to reflect on his acculturated family. Gopnik discovered a dynamic familiar to many Americans who descend from immigrants: “What the son wished to forget, the grandson wished to remember.” Gopnik described how his second-generation parents sought success in their fields, immersing themselves and their children in the secular world: “The eradication left an imprint stronger than indoctrination could have. We had ‘Jew’ written all over us in the form of marks from the eraser.” But acculturation, as Gopnik realized through his study with Rabbi Ismar Schorch of the Jewish Theological Seminary, plays an important role in the Bible. Mordecai and Esther’s acculturation did not distance them from the Jewish people; to the contrary, their standing in the secular court enabled them to save their fellow Jews. More broadly, the eraser marks pointed to a rich and variegated Jewish culture that fascinated Gopnik.

“At least for a certain kind of court Jew, being Jewish remains not an exercise in reading in or reading past, but just in reading on, in continuing to turn the pages. The pages have been weird and varied enough in the past to be weird and varied in the future, and there is no telling who will shine in them.”

Through this interpretation of the Purim story, Gopnik found a place for himself in the Jewish story.

Admittedly, most American Jews do not write poetry for the Statue of Liberty or essays for the New Yorker, but many, like Lazarus and Gopnik, consider Jewishness important to their identity. “American Jews overwhelmingly say they are proud to be Jewish and feel a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people,” states the 2013 Pew Study on Jews and Judaism in America. Despite clear-cut evidence of a strong identification with Jewishness, when the study explores what this identification means, or how it might be transmitted generationally, the results raise more questions.
than answers. One section, “Being Jewish More a Matter of Culture and Ancestry Than Religion” shows that overall, 62 percent of American Jews believe that Jewish identity is mainly about ancestry and/or culture, 15 percent believe it is mainly about religion, and 23 percent believe it is a combination of ancestry, culture, and religion. Crucially, 55 percent of Jews who define themselves primarily as religious still feel that ancestry and culture are essential. But what does cultural Jewishness mean? The Pew study fails to clarify, and in some ways goes against the logic of its own findings by opening the section on culture and ancestry with the statement, “Secularism has a long tradition in Jewish life in America.” If the study shows that many religious Jews value cultural identity, then cultural identity cannot simply be a stand-in for secular identity. Neither should secularism exist as somehow beyond the scope of the religious Jew. Most religious Jews, no matter how pious, navigate a secular world in some way or another.

**Being Jewish More About Culture and Ancestry than Religion**

% saying being Jewish is mainly a matter of ...

Source: Pew Research Center
Jewish communal leaders, educators, and funders need to give cultural Jewish identity an active, positive, and constructive identity.

Paradoxically, it is the study’s confusing terminology that points to the complexities of modern Jewish identity, its overlapping areas of culture and religion, and its potential as a source of inspiration for high-quality public history and education. In 1918, Mordecai Kaplan reviewed findings that showed that many Jews in New York attended makeshift or temporary synagogues for the High Holidays. So many Jews needed synagogues that entrepreneurs hastily rented halls, movie theaters, and even churches throughout the city, creating the “mushroom synagogue phenomenon.” At the time, mainstream Jewish communal leaders viewed the mushroom synagogues disdainfully, as it purportedly showed that Jews didn’t care enough to have proper synagogue services or to be synagogue members. Kaplan instead viewed the phenomenon as “a dormant Jewish will-to-live.”

Despite the pulls of Americanization, and maybe even because of them, early 20th-century Jews evidenced a strong need for Jewish communal life, and even liturgy, at certain moments in the year. Indeed, earlier studies had shown that even some avowed socialists attended shul on the High Holidays. In 1918, Kaplan viewed the High Holiday Jews as “a wonderful opportunity” and argued that “with proper organization it could be impressed into the service of the communal cause, and developed into a living, active Jewish consciousness.” This blurriness of boundaries with regard to secular, cultural, and religious identifications endures in the 21st century, and like Kaplan, the 21st-century Jewish community should view it as an opportunity to engage and redefine cultural Jewish identity, so that it encompasses a broad, rich, accessible terrain of Jewishness. Its very complexity provides an opportunity for serious and engaging work.

Jewish communal leaders, educators, and funders need to give cultural Jewish identity an active, positive, and constructive identity; it shouldn’t just be the absence of religion. If cultural Jewish identity is used simply as a default category for those who don’t identify religiously, then it loses its substance. However, if cultural Jewishness has substance, then religious Jews can also be cultural Jews, and cultural Jews can develop effective ways of transmitting a sense of Jewish identity to their children. The Pew Study found that 90 percent of religious Jews raise their children as Jews, with a distinct set of rituals and beliefs, whereas only one-third of those who define themselves as “Jews of no religion” report that they are raising their children as Jewish.
Cultural Jewish identity can become a more meaningful category of identification and analysis, and even a community builder, if we use it as a point of departure to engage with the Jewish story, in all of its complexities. Following the model of education scholars Laura Yares and Benjamin Jacobs, culture includes “an expanding library” of “textual, ideational, and folk traditions.” It likewise looks to “…the expanding corpus of Jewish texts, rituals and traditions over the centuries [that] accommodated different ways of thinking about and doing things over time” and views law and religion, as well as “the people as a whole” as authorities (2017).

Twenty-first century Jews must reclaim the category of cultural Jewishness from the limpid and passive association of “secular” and instead infuse it with stories, content, and substance and teach it in creative ways that enable individuals to experience a sense of connectedness. Cultural Jewishness should be cultivated as a shared world among all American Jews, one filled with tools and pathways for actively uncovering, discovering, and continuing the Jewish story. While some American Jews—like Lazarus and Gopnik—might engage with the Jewish story on their own by reading books, writing essays, or translating poetry, many others require other forms, ways, and experiences to engage with the Jewish story. We need to start connecting the dots between the archives, scholars—those keepers and creators of the Jewish story and the sites, centers, museums, and educators who can interpret the story and make it accessible—and the swath of American Jews eager to find their place in the story.
My Story and the Roots of My Question/Why I care deeply about this question

My own childhood involved experiences in the Orthodox and Reform communities, with a variety of Jewish teachers who shared their stories and a range of classes, from *chumash* (Bible) to synagogue architecture. At an early age I experienced and grew to recognize the different modes of Jewish life, learned how to correctly use the terms “shul” and “temple,” and started to wonder about what bound all of us—the onetime kibbutznik Sunday school teacher, my classmate’s Hasidic parents, the suburban kids at my Sunday school—together. In college, Jewish studies courses furthered these lines of inquiry, leading me to pursue a PhD at Columbia University in American and Jewish history. My own Jewish identity straddled cultural, secular, and religious worlds and supports the findings of Yares and Jacobs, who argue for “a more integrated understanding of the relationship between ‘religious’ and ‘cultural/ethnic’ expressions as combined products of the modern Jewish cultural experience” (2017).
Much of the first few years at Columbia I burrowed in Butler Library’s stacks absorbing texts, analyzing them in seminars, and trying to make sense of them in my papers. Toward the end of my second year of graduate school I started leading walking tours of the Lower East Side, and on those streets I started to connect the dots from the Yiddish-speaking immigrants I had studied to their grandchildren and great-grandchildren who made pilgrimages to the tenement-lined streets to uncover the past. Texts studied in the dimly lit stacks became illuminated when connected to their original homes, as an ad for a Yiddish café promising lively conversation with tea and cake breathed life into a shuttered tenement building storefront. Guiding visitors to decipher the name of S. Jarmulowsky, now etched in stone on a Canal Street building, became the opportunity to explain that he was a banker who sold ship tickets, whose name would have been uttered aloud hundreds of times on a daily basis by those customers who dubbed him the “magician of Jewish immigration.”

We stood in front of the Jewish Daily Forward building and analyzed the questions immigrants submitted to editors as they sought guidance in the new world, and somehow they helped the generations on the streets make sense of their own world. The visitors’ questions motivated me to do more research in the stacks and to finish my dissertation. But along the way I realized that public history was my calling and that as much as I loved scholarship, it was more important, more pressing to connect the dots. I began a career shaping content for broad and diverse audiences, first at the Museum at Eldridge Street and then at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. While I’ve written academic articles and books, I know my largest audiences have been the hundreds of thousands I’ve reached on the city streets or in the museum world. At the Tenement Museum we incorporated the Jewish story into the larger historical frameworks of immigration, the labor movement, and religious experience, and wove together scholarship from a variety of perspectives and focuses. The exhibits attract 250,000 a year, non-Jews and Jews. And among the Jews a wide range of identifications have emerged —yeshiva students, college students, and Hasidic families might be on a single tour, exchanging stories.

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My experience working with the public and seeing how carefully crafted storytelling has the power to engage minds and build community has pushed me to leave the more secular museum world and try and understand how the American Jewish community writ large might benefit from this dynamic. When I came to the American Jewish Historical Society, I understood the importance of creating a historical exhibit on a story important for both Jews and Americans, and doubly important for American Jews. We created a plan for an exhibit on Emma Lazarus, whose papers are at AJHS, and turned to the National Endowment for the Humanities for funding.

In the secular world, a standard bearer for museum exhibits, films, digital work, and other formats is the National Endowment for the Humanities. The NEH emphasizes the translation of scholarship into humanities themes created with a public audience in mind, and it disperses more than $150 million each year. The rigorous grant application process forces applicants to consider the importance of their scholarship and guides them in thinking through creative ways to express that content to public audiences. A peer review process assesses projects on the basis of intellectual content and humanities significance. The review board looks for “the significance of the subject, the humanities ideas, and the collections; the quality and relevance of the humanities scholarship informing the project; the extent to which the project offers an analytical perspective on the themes and ideas that underlie it.” Just as important as the humanities themes are the audience; reviewers assess “the appeal of the subject and the accessibility of the ideas to the intended audience.”

The NEH generously granted our exhibit $300,000. But as I set out to find additional sources of funding, I realized that there is no parallel in the Jewish funding world; few foundations seem to emphasize or seek out stories and storytellers. The NEH kindly sent me a list of projects related to American Jewish history in the past decade, and I realized that these films and exhibits relied on the NEH for their sole source of funding; in other words, had they not received NEH funding, they might not have come to fruition. Why is it that, when studies show that Jewish audiences identify through culture, we don’t have a funding mechanism to build on this evident interest? If we are the “people of the book,” why don’t we have organizations that develop accessible storylines? All too often, “culture” in the funding world refers to the fine arts, which of course is valuable, but doesn’t seem to draw on the greatest assets our tradition has—its stories—as well as what the greater secular world has found—that people love stories.
In addition to having a population that considers culture and ancestry important, American Jews have never had more academic tools to extract and analyze stories. Jewish studies programs across the country produce scholars well-steeped in their disciplines who have mined Jewish history, anthropology, literature, and sociology to produce impressive scholarship. Their work has shaped Jewish studies courses at campuses across the country. The Association for Jewish Studies, a learned society, counts over 2,000 members, and every December hosts a conference offering hundreds of panels. Yet this conference is decidedly academic in nature and its content is not accessible to the broader public. Academic monographs and articles rarely cross over into the public realm. Recently AJS broadened its mission to include the public and has followed through by creating a captivating new podcast series. But its chief focus, by necessity, remains scholars who comprise its membership and attend its conferences. And the scholars inhabit the university world where academic writing, not exhibition creation or public history, leads the way to tenure.

Cultural Jewishness as Connections: A Jewish Endowment for the Humanities

A Jewish National Endowment for the Humanities could raise the standard of museum exhibitions, public programming, and teacher trainings by coordinating work among scholars, teachers, museum professionals, and audiences. A Jewish National Endowment for the Humanities could help create a culture of excellence around the sharing of the Jewish story by encouraging scholars, museums, and educators to connect in their creation of exhibitions and other formats that engage American Jewish audiences—and others—with rich, complex cultural stories.
One arena that brings Jewish stories to a larger public is Jewish museums and book readings. This year the Council of American Jewish Museums held its annual conference in Los Angeles, drawing hundreds of museum workers to discuss best practices. Its network of 75 institutions includes museums both large and small in over 30 states. Another popular format that promotes Jewish content is the Jewish Book Council; the Council orchestrates a speakers’ bureau that sends authors to Jewish communities throughout the country. Naomi Firestone-Teeter, the Council’s Executive Director, estimates that its lectures, readings, and journal reach over one million people. Yet it is important to note that most cultural American Jewish venues work with budgets under two million; though their interpretive work is critical, leaders devote the bulk of their time to fundraising as opposed to thinking as deeply as they would like about the big picture. Individual museums and archives face similar constraints.

Thus, though we have interest, content, and even a network of spaces in which Jewish history can come to life, we lack both conceptual and logistical coordination. Conceptual coordination requires coordinating scholars, museum specialists, and audiences; logistical coordination would help an especially well-crafted exhibition travel from one location to another. We lack a wide-reaching, standard-setting institution or council to train practitioners and funders, and cultivate a community of learners and teachers around the Jewish story. At base, while the American Jewish community shows incredible potential—it has archives, Jewish scholarship, networks of schools and museums, and an interest in Jewish culture—not enough resources exist to knit these elements together and not enough funds are accessible to produce truly innovative, first-class work. As Melissa Martens Yaverbaum, Executive Director of the Council of American Jewish Museums, explains, “There’s no organization or system in place to incentivize collective thinking and to reward quality and communal impact.”

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Thus, individual museums and cultural institutions continue to chase funding that draws them into increasingly specialized niches on a case-by-case basis. One result is that no one is telling a larger story informed by collective knowledge and shared expertise. Yet Yaverbaum remains convinced there is a larger story with critical themes to convey and that audiences are receptive. “In 2019, people see a world in need and in crisis. The Jewish story has great utility for today to help us navigate these complexities.”

**Imagine what a Jewish National Endowment for the Humanities could do.** In the wake of the anniversary of the Tree of Life tragedy, the topic of anti-Semitism continues to make its way into headlines of both Jewish and secular newspapers. People debate: have we entered a new phase in American history? In mid-October my organization gathered 15 historians to candidly discuss how their own views have changed or strengthened, and all agreed on the increased demand for courses, syllabi, and public lectures on anti-Semitism. If a Jewish NEH existed, an organization could apply for a major grant to create an exhibit on anti-Semitism in America. It could connect with archives to discover new primary sources, gather oral histories from the community, and assemble a dynamic team of museum educators, historians, and visual artists to create an exhibit. Further, the exhibit could be designed to travel. Or, if scaled properly, a standard exhibit core could be created to account for perhaps 75 percent of the exhibit, while the other 25 percent could be tailored to each location the core visits. The exhibit would engage the American Jewish community in the stories of anti-Semitism in the country, priming it to have a national conversation based on substance.

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CONCLUSION

Though Emma Lazarus studied Jewish history—reading Heinrich Graetz’s *History of the Jews* and using it as a basis of inspiration for her poetry and plays—she most likely would not have imagined that her own story, in turn, would become the basis for curriculum, and that students of many backgrounds would come to an archive, leaf through manuscript boxes with primary sources about her, and piece together the story of her life and work. And she probably could not have expected that a red leather notebook filled with her handwritten poetry would become the piece de resistance in the curriculum, with students gathered round to see the book where she set pen to paper to write her oeuvre. The students start the curriculum with a familiarity with the Statue of Liberty and its poem but knowing absolutely nothing about its author. Just as Adam Gopnik understood how eraser marks can prompt curiosity, the piecing together of the story engages the hearts and minds of students of all ages. Gopnik’s advice that Jews “continu[e] to turn the pages” assumes heightened meaning in an archive. But it’s not enough to turn the pages; we need to interpret, connect, and create ways to scaffold the story and reach new audiences.
Our Jewish history and stories from across the country have so much to tell us, and if set up in the right way, have the power to actively engage 21st-century American Jews and connect them to the past, to one another, and to the next generation. But to build and reinforce this shared world of stories and storytelling, we need to connect the dots between stories, storytellers, and audiences in meaningful, artful, and active ways. We need a Jewish National Endowment for the Humanities that values stories and storytelling, rigor, and education. If we depend on the NEH to fund American Jewish stories, we will continue to have excellent, but isolated, pieces of work. But a Jewish National Endowment for the Humanities that has at its heart the goal of connecting Jews to one another and across time could make an exciting impact on the American Jewish story.

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Dr. Annie Polland is the Executive Director of the American Jewish Historical Society. She was formerly the Vice President for Programs & Education at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, where she oversaw exhibits and interpretation. She is the co-author, with Daniel Soyer, of Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, winner of the 2012 National Jewish Book Award. She received her Ph.D. in History from Columbia University and also served as Vice President of Education at the Museum at Eldridge Street, where she wrote Landmark of the Spirit (Yale University). She also teaches at NYU.