

## REVIEW ESSAY

### REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY, PHILADELPHIA

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The new National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH), located on the east side of Philadelphia's Independence Mall in close proximity to the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, and the National Constitutional Center, has a twofold focus. In the broadest manner, the institution celebrates the promise that American-style freedoms offers to all minority communities. This focus is refracted through the experience of how Jews who emigrated to or were born in America have taken advantage of those freedoms, thus creating the second and more explicit focal point. As with most celebrations, the museum's orientation is overwhelmingly positive, though the core exhibition consistently strives to present multiple perspectives rather than advance simple boosterism of American Jews.

The NMAJH tells the story of Jews living in the United States through the prism of America and American values. It takes on the complex task of explaining Jews (a people sharing, sometimes contentiously, a religious, cultural, and ethnic heritage); Judaism (an evolving set of religious beliefs and practices,

shaped by diverse and conflicting modes of interpretation and authority); and Jewishness (a cultural and ethnic experience of living as a Jew, in relation to other Jews and to non-Jews) to both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. The museum also aspires to explain America to all visitors, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, by explicating the ways that the Jewish community has flourished in and contributed to the broader American environment. The museum succeeds in the latter attempt, with more mixed success in the former one. In the overarching interpretive framework, “American” is ultimately privileged over “Jewish” in a manner that complicates any narration or interpretation of Jewishness.

The museum’s placement on Independence Mall mandates engagement with the founding themes of the American republic—freedom, democratic participation, and good citizenship. Visitors to the Mall are, presumably, the non-Jews whom the curators and exhibit designers imagined might be inclined to visit such a community-specific museum. The building’s design intends to invite such exploration. According to concept papers generated by architect James Polshek, the design reflects the balance between open



FIGURE 1: The museum is located on Independence Mall and in both architecture and exhibition seeks to reflect American and Jewish themes and the intersection between them. National Museum of American Jewish History (dusk), © Jeff Goldberg/Esto, courtesy of National Museum of American Jewish History.

American society and fragile democracy (reflected in the exterior glass sheathing) and, through the terracotta construction that mirrors nearby historic buildings, the durability of the Jewish people and America's role as sheltering haven for Jews. The museum does not disappoint in regard to the exploration of American themes: the core exhibition's chronology is illuminated by investigations into freedom. Traveling from the fourth floor downward, the exhibition explores "Foundations of Freedom: 1654–1880" (fourth floor); "Dreams of Freedom: 1880–1945" (third floor); and "Choices and Challenges of Freedom: 1945–Today" (second floor).

Through this focus, the exhibition's creators are making suggestions about what America is and should be, that is, a place that welcomes ethnic and religious minorities and enables them to offer their gifts to the larger public, yet permits them to retain the distinctiveness that cultivated these gifts. This is not a straightforward narrative, and the challenges to the tolerance, let alone embrace, of America's Jews are acknowledged in all of the periods leading up to World War II. The exhibit addresses explicit anti-Semitism in all periods of Jewish residency in America, from efforts to prevent their emigration in the colonial era to the infamous 1915 lynching of Leo Frank, from the nativist-driven closing of U.S. borders in 1924 that eliminated a haven for European Jews to restrictions on employment, education, and housing that stood until after World War II. However, the overwhelming orientation of the core exhibition is positive. America, it is asserted, is an embracing haven. The very presence of the museum on one of the national malls suggests vindication, and possibly even creates proof, for this perspective. Like the new exhibit bringing to life the experience of slaves in George Washington's Philadelphia presidential home down the block from the museum ("President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation"), this institution's depiction of the diversity of Jews in America insists that to understand the full richness of the American experience, one must look beyond the white, Protestant, landed men who penned the U.S. Constitution in nearby Independence Hall. The extensive Jewish contributions to the national American experience—in the arts, sports, politics, science, and industry, and more—are carefully and even exhaustively represented, implicitly communicating that Jews are good and valuable citizens of America, and that America would be impoverished by their exclusion.

As the museum aims to explain Jews, Judaism, Jewishness, and even America to non-Jewish visitors, it also is iterating these concepts to Jewish visitors. Many of these visitors are deeply attached to the Jewish component

of their American Jewish identities but may feel confused by tensions they experience between it and the American component. They may also feel confounded by the multiple and competing claims of authenticity put forward by the Jewish community, which range from Orthodox to liberal expressions of religious Judaism to fully secular Jewish identities expressed through involvement in Jewish communal organizations, pursuit of universally oriented social justice work, immersions in Jewish culture, or some combination of all of these commitments. The core exhibition promotes to American Jews a particular narrative of empowerment and cultural generativity within the free American environment. Through interactive installations and invitations to contribute to the core exhibition, including an opportunity to "Tell Your Own Story" via videorecording at the exhibition's conclusion, visitors are treated not as passive observers of static history but as active shapers of an ongoing and ever-changing narrative. The story of America's Jews as told through the core exhibition should be at once familiar to most Jewish visitors, even if individual details are new. At the same time, in its insistence on and invitation to engagement and lay-driven change, the exhibition may even be subtly transformative of visitors' own beliefs and behaviors.

In this fashion, the NMAJH endeavors to move beyond a nostalgic emphasis of such immigrant bastions as New York's Lower East Side, frequently valorized in popular discourse as a site of Jewish authenticity in contrast to expressions of contemporary Jewishness that are perceived to be thinner. In the NMAJH's explorations of contemporary Jewish life, necessarily partial and not fully coherent, present-day expressions of Jewishness are repeatedly invited into the exhibition and in this way deemed worthy of note. The immigrant experience, massive in scope and influential in American Jewish history, is honored but not granted too much authority. Through extensive artifacts, films, and interactive exhibits, the breadth of the American Jewish experience, up to this very day, is richly communicated.

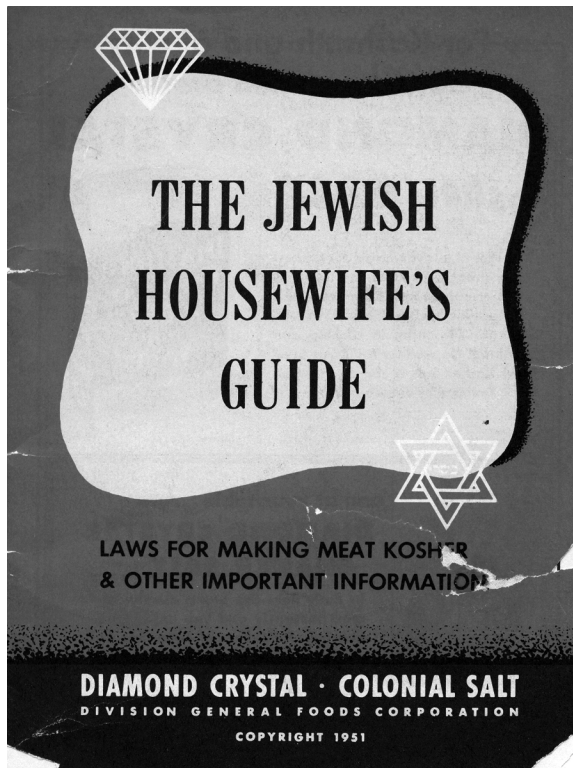
The NMAJH's focus on freedom and the successful integration of Jews within the free American context is a distinct counternarrative to the other national Jewish institution, located not on Philadelphia's Independence Mall but in close proximity to Washington's National Mall, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. That institution focuses not on an indigenous or even immigrant experience but is dedicated to chronicling the decimation of the European Jewish community at mid-twentieth century. It is not entirely divorced from the American Jewish experience, since the confluence of actions that has come to be known as "the Holocaust" catapulted the

American Jewish community to prominence as the premier and, at the time, largest Jewish community in the world. Indeed, the NMAJH's treatment of the Holocaust focuses on the efforts of American Jews to aid and intervene on behalf of European Jewry before, during, and after the Holocaust; it makes no effort to chronicle the scope of devastation. The major emphasis of the NMAJH tells a story not of persecution, otherness, and ultimate destruction, but one of empowerment, opportunity, mutual embrace, and success; its message is one not of vigilance but rather of celebration.

The framework of freedom, extremely apt for explicating America, works reasonably well for explicating Jewishness, but is a problematic lens for explaining Judaism. As a religion, Judaism has existed on multiple continents for more than 2,500 years, and throughout much of that period its transmission was through authoritative, tightly controlled structures, though expressions of folk religion always flourished and influenced elite interpretations. Explorations of religious authority in a liberal context—noncoercive and shared with nonelites—are only as old as the Enlightenment era, that is, roughly the same as the experiment of American democracy. They too are experimental in nature, sometimes controversial, best understood as works in progress, in constant tension with Jewish traditions and with new opportunities. The NMAJH's core exhibition catalogs the diversity of Jewish religious responses to modernity: the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist movements in Judaism appear at various points, with the greatest representation on the third floor (1880–1945). Yet Judaism as a religion is interspersed in an episodic fashion that fails to communicate in any systematic manner a clear perspective on, for example, a Jew's relationship to God or how Jews may act to express their identity as a religious people. Though this diffuse treatment quite likely reflects the experience and understanding of many non-Orthodox Jewish visitors, little of the richness and complexity of Jewish religious thought and practice and their evolution is communicated. An interactive theater highlights synagogue architecture in greater detail than the range of activities that take place within these buildings. Modern Orthodoxy, including its separatist elements that shun contact with mainstream American society, are almost absent from the postwar floor, though this group represents the fastest-growing segment of the contemporary Jewish community.

Resolute in its focus on the power of individual Jews to create expressions of Jewishness and to participate in and help shape the larger American environment, the core exhibition also treats lightly most of the institutions that comprise the complex network of the “organized Jewish community” for the last

100 years. One great advantage of this orientation away from institutionalized structures, be they religious or communal, is the balanced gender representation. Women's artifacts and experiences are exhibited and explored throughout the core exhibition. Since rabbinic leadership was restricted to men until the early 1970s and senior leadership of most communal institutions did not begin to include women until roughly the same period, the people-oriented emphasis of the exhibition neatly avoids the pitfalls of a "great man in history" approach that a more institutional approach might be unable to avoid.



**FIGURE 2:** In its focus on the power of individual Jews to contribute both to the Jewish and American environments, the NMAJH achieves balanced gender representation throughout the exhibition. One artifact illustrating the experience of American Jewish women is "The Jewish Housewife's Guide." Joseph Jacobs Jewish Market Organization, New York: Diamond Crystal-Colonial Salt, 1951, National Museum of American Jewish History, 2006.1.6267, Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish Americana. Diamond Crystal and Colonial are trademarks of Cargill, Incorporated.

The tension between religious Judaism and the ethno-cultural Jewishness most represented in the core exhibition is also reflected in the museum's admission policies on Saturday, the day of rest in Judaism. A religious approach to the Sabbath includes restrictions on various everyday practices, including the handling of money. The NMAJH is primarily a museum of ethnicity that presents most fully either nonreligious or liberal expressions of Judaism, yet is understood by the wider world—and desires to be so understood—to stand in for the entirety of Judaism in America. The museum's administration adopted a compromise policy of honoring religious proscriptions by keeping the museum open but closing the box office. Tickets for Saturday admission can either be purchased online in advance or at box offices of other nearby institutions. Yet the ethnocultural emphasis of the museum's core exhibition misses the animating influence of religion and never presents a coherent picture of the source of Jewish values, or what may be the commitments that unite Jews *beyond* an embrace of American-style freedom. Admittedly, these commitments are challenging to identify, especially in the face of the ever-increasing diversity that the museum so amply portrays, and even harder to illustrate, and any efforts would likely invite criticism from partisans who disagree with a proffered interpretation.

There is also little discussion of the possibility that ethnic identification alone is not sustainable across generations in a context of porous boundaries. Thus intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews—at once a measure of the acceptance of Jews by majority society and a source of deep anxiety in various pockets of Jewish life regarding the prospect of Jewish survival—is not significantly addressed after the colonial period. This silence is a definitive response to those who are pessimistic about Jewish survival in an open society or the impact of modernity on the Jewish religion and the Jewish people. The core exhibition of the NMAJH insists that the experience of Jews in America is a positive story projecting an equally positive future. The museum's ultimate message, especially to Jewish visitors, is a message about empowerment in what one prominent Jewish American thinker called the “Jewish civilization”: Judaism in America, the museum suggests, is what *you* will make of it. This message is cemented with the invitation for visitors to “tell their own story” as the final act upon leaving the core exhibition, with each recorded video emailed home to the creator and entered into the museum's catalog, for private screening on monitors equipped with earphones or for inclusion in a curated display projected into the sitting area at the end of the core exhibit.



Each of the three floors of the core exhibition begins with a “preview gallery” featuring video and photos that provide limited contextualization. A pathway through each floor is suggested but not rigidly enforced; visitors have freedom to move around the galleries on their own. Maps and other signage tracking Jewish residency in America are placed at the beginning of each period, and each one ends with a three-part timeline tracing developments in world history, American history, American Jewish history. The maps are excellent visual communicators of information throughout the core exhibition, providing concrete markers in the midst of an increasingly dense collection of artifacts. These artifacts are usually in consonance with the chronological period and the larger themes discussed above.

Periodization, though helpful and probably necessary in any historical museum, always comes at a cost. The first period, “Foundations of Freedom: 1654–1880,” aims not only to cover this period but to set the context for the rest of the exhibition, including an explanation of the longevity and breadth of the worldwide Jewish community and the particular appeal of America for many Jews. To do so, the preview gallery opens with a quote from the Yiddish newspaper editor Abraham Cahan, an émigré who arrived in the early twentieth century. Cahan’s quote is emblematic and in this way useful, yet the inclusion of this and other figures from later eras immediately confuses the premise of periodization. The second period, “Dreams of Freedom: 1880–1945,” is extremely rich with artifacts and interactive exhibits, to the point of crowding and cacophony. This may be a deliberate design decision to reflect the density and intensity of the period of massive immigration, from the steerage in which most immigrants crossed the Atlantic Ocean to their living and working quarters in urban settings. However evocative, the impact can also be overwhelming to visitors. The decision to devote a whole gallery to the relatively short period following World War II (“Choices and Challenges of Freedom: 1945–Today”) necessarily privileges the current era and is in keeping with the museum’s self-presentation as a site of engagement and relevance designed to empower contemporary visitors and ensure that they feel part of shaping the narrative of the Jewish experience in America. Certain developments in Jewish history or Jewish concepts are presented unequally from period to period, leading at times to distortion or inadequate treatment.

The NMAJH made a major investment in technology. There are films throughout the museum: playwright Alfred Uhry narrates the impact of Leo Frank’s lynching on his family; visitors can sit in a mock theater to watch



one of three films about the Jewish presence in Hollywood narrated by Carl Reiner (Jewish comedians), Juliana Margulies (Jewish actors and actresses), and Mandy Patinkin (Jews in the film industry); men and women who served in the armed forces during World War II reflect on their experience in oral histories; multiple congregations are profiled in images and interviews in a small theater featuring synagogue architecture; and short films narrated by influential Americans are the basis of the “Only in America” exhibit that runs continuously in the museum lobby. Various interactive exhibits are deeply engaging, foremost among them a large installation in the first gallery charting the industrialization and westward expansion of America and overlaying Jewish participation in these developments. Visitors can experience themselves as an immigrant facing a possibly hostile immigration officer at a port of entry by choosing a persona and making a set of choices, including taking tests to measure competency. They can drive their own explorations of the contributions of prominent Jewish American artists, musicians, athletes, and other cultural figures. In an exhibit on the importance of Jewish camping, visitors can search for photos of the camps they attended, and plans are underway to allow visitors to submit their own photos for inclusion. In the



**FIGURE 3:** An interactive map table in the “Dreams of Freedom: 1880–1945” floor charts industrial and population shifts in America and Jewish participation in them and is an excellent example of the impressive technology deployed throughout the museum. Interactive Map Table, Jay Rosenblatt, courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History.



FIGURE 4: The Contemporary Issues Forum, located near the end of the core exhibition, enables visitors to post their own comments on themes present throughout the core exhibition and on issues currently under discussion in the American Jewish community. Contemporary Issues Forum, Jay Rosenblatt, courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History.

“Contemporary Issues Forum,” they can post their own comments on themes present throughout the core exhibition and on issues under discussion in the American Jewish community today. Visitors can opt to preserve their thoughts for later viewers by scanning their sticky notes for projection.

The core exhibition attains a balance between a multipronged grand narrative and individual stories that illuminate it. Throughout it, there are story boxes, small installations, and oral histories that bring to life the larger ideas and themes. The children’s installations, however, are surprisingly weak. Apart from a room given over to enacting nineteenth-century Western migration in a covered wagon and a camp bunkhouse, many seem to be an afterthought (a beaver pelt that can be touched is placed in the colonial period and a simple matching game illustrates the clothing that workers in the garment industry assembled in the early twentieth century). A child able to use technology may be engaged, not least by the technology itself, but other younger children may well be bored. High school and college students, however, could easily mine the richness of the artifacts and interactive

components of the core exhibition to learn about overarching themes of American Jewish history or individual experiences of Jewish men and women in different periods and locations.

The National Museum of American Jewish History sets out to directly and repeatedly engage adult visitors, and it succeeds. Through the framing questions of the core exhibition and the opportunities for self-direction and interaction, visitors may imagine themselves as the historical Jews depicted and may insert their own experiences—as Jews or non-Jews—into the story. Such an enterprise, especially one that seeks to define “Americanness” as much as “Jewishness,” unavoidably introduces inconsistencies and flattens elements of the Jewish experience. However, the overarching impression is one of richness and the positive presentation of a vibrant community.